

Hakuouki: Hijikata

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Summary: This is a retelling of his side of the story but if anyone feels offended that I am doing this then please let me know and I will stop... Otherwise like the title says this is Hijikata's side the of game by IDEA FACTORY. I personally think everyone should get to know how it truly happened and not just how the anime tells it... Rated M since the game was

1. Prologue

I have a tendency to want to retell the story of things such as games, manga and suchâ€|

I've decided to do Hijikata's side of Hakuouki by IDEA FACTORYâ€|

Mainly since his story is the longest

However if this goes over well with those who decide to read it then I might consider doing the other stories as wellâ€|but only if someone requests it of meâ€|

DISCLAIMER

This is purely for entertainment

I am NOT claiming this story as mine .

I hope you enjoy

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* * *

><p>HIJIKATA TOSHIZO<p>

PROLOGUE

January 1864

"So this is Kyoto..."

It was awfully impressive, there was no denying it. Even the simple hellos between people passing in the street seemed warm and friendly.

They nodded and smiled to one another almost as if they were family, not strangers about on errands.

Still...

There was something else as well. something that made the city feel strangely cold. Almost as though there was a great invisible wall, shutting out anyone who wandered in from the country.

"Um..."

It wasn't particularly comfortable, I had to admit.

"...No. No, that's all in my head."

I had walked quite some distance to reach Kyoto, and it occurred to me that my mind and body were both very tired. Even so, tiredness was no reason for me to stand about feeling sorry for myself. I couldn't afford to, after all.

"Um, excuse me!"

With new - albeit forced - resolve, I tried to stop a passerby.

"I'm sorry, but I seem to be a bit lost, could you...?"

xxxxxxx

"What am I supposed to do now?"

I was lost again, but in a different sort of way.

I sighed and found myself looking up at the darkening sky. The sun was beginning to set.

The people I'd spoken to hadn't been unkind, and they'd given me the directions I'd needed, but...

"Couldn't he have chosen a better time to leave the city?"

Apart from my father, there was only one other person in the city who I could rely on: Dr. Matsumoto.

Dr. Matsumoto was a doctor in the service of the shogunate.

I had never met him myself, but my father put a great deal of trust in the man.

He had told me that if I should run into any trouble during his

absence, I was to contact Dr. Matsumoto.

Unfortunately...

Dr. Matsumoto was apparently out of town on business, and would not return for some time.

"Was I too hasty? Perhaps I should have waited..."

True, it is rather rude to visit unannounced, which was why I had sent a letter ahead of me. Of course, if he'd been gone for very long, then he had almost certainly not read my letter.

Perhaps, I thought, I should have waited for a reply before traveling alone to a city I'd never even seen.

"But..."

No. I knew I could not have waited any longer.

Flashback

"Chizuru..."

"Is something wrong, Father?"

He paused a moment, and looked at me.

"I... It seems I must go to the city of Kyoto for a time."

"Work again?"

He had been leaving the house often then, sometimes for days at a time.

"How long will you be gone?"

"...I'm afraid I can't say. A month, perhaps. Maybe two." He looked to me with a frown.

"Oh..."

There was no hiding my disappointment.

Nonetheless, I wasn't a child anymore. I couldn't beg him not to go, or some other foolishness. Yes, I'd be lonely, but... I was much more worried for him.

"Please Father, be careful. They say that the city of Kyoto is dangerous."

He only smiled and nodded.

"You needn't fret. I will be sure to send you letters as often as I am able, so that you will have no need to worry."

This brought little comfort but it was enough.

"...Okay. You promise?"

...

Father kept his promise.

A new letter arrived every day, and I scarcely had the time to respond before another would arrive. He told me that he worried about me, home all by myself.

Then...

...the letters stopped.

A whole month passed, with no word from my father, and I began to worry.

End Flashback

"Father..."

They say Kyoto is full of ronin. It is not a safe place.

Usually a samurai is paid by their house, but...

Ronin with no house to report to often rob people in order to make ends meet. They're nothing more than violent criminals who hide behind the image of the samurai.

Such is the state of the city of Kyoto: The city of ronin.

Small wonder, then, that I worried for my father's safety. My mind would concoct horrible possibilities and I inevitably found myself depressed and tense.

"Hmm.. First, I suppose I need to find a place to stay."

Lost in thought, I hadn't noticed that night had already fallen. If I was honest with myself, I hadn't the first idea how long it might take to find my father.

I'd taken some money with me, but it wasn't much. Enough to last me a month, I hoped, if I used it wisely.

If I could find Father in that time, so much the better. If not, hopefully Dr. Matsumoto would return before my funds ran out. Should I be unable to find either of them, then it seemed I would be forced to return home.

"Well at any rate... I should try and be as frugal as possible..."

And so I lengthened my stride and set off down the street. Fortunately for me, men's clothing was much more conducive to such a pace than my usual dress would have been.

I'd decided early on that Kyoto was far too dangerous for a girl from the country to explore alone, and that it would be wise for me to dress like a man - or at least a boy.

My disguise, such as it was, had proven successful, and I'd made it

all the way to Kyoto unmolested.

Perhaps that success had gone to my head, and let me think a girl dressed as a boy could explore Kyoto as she pleased.

But Kyoto is not a safe place.

I should have remembered that.

Instead, I had somehow convinced myself that whatever dangers the city held did not apply to me.

"Hey, kid."

I was about to discover otherwise.

"Eh?!" I squeaked.

I spun around. In the street in front of me were three men.
Ronin.

"Can I help you...?"

I did my best to keep my voice calm as I reached in what I felt was a nonchalant way for my kodachi.

My father had made me take lessons in self-defense. I'd kept with them, and actually done rather well. My skill was enough to defend against most attacks then again...

Perhaps it was my confidence in my skill that had put me in this situation in the first place.

I'd messed up and let my guard down. My fault. There was a chance I could take them on and win, but... There were three of them, and one of me.

"Pretty nice blade you got there, kid."

Only then did I realize they were far more interested in my sword than they were in me.

"Looks like a bit much for a pup like this one, am I right?"

The first ronin nodded and turned to me with a sneer, "Give it here, okay? We'll use it to defend our country."

I took a step back, "But...this is..."

The sword wasn't just some blade I'd picked up: It had been passed down through my family for generations. There was no way I could give it to the ronin.

Unfortunately, I had the feeling they wouldn't understand.

...

...

In such a situation, the best decision was undoubtedly...

...To retreat!

And so I turned and ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

The second ronin was the first to react to my decision to escape,
"Hey! Get back here, you little bastard!"

A short time later...

"Gosh, they sure don't give up easily, do they!"

I felt like I'd been running for quite a while, but I could still hear the ronin behind me, cursing loudly. I ducked into an alley and flattened myself against the wall.

After deciding they weren't to close, I crept farther into the alley.

Someone had left a couple sheets of wood leaning against one of the houses. It was a perfect spot to hide.

With luck, I thought as I knelt down to shuffle under them, this will get me out of this mess...

...

...

"...Huh?"

Something was wrong. I'd expected to hear the ronin yelling to each other, looking for me, but...

Seconds turned into minutes, and I heard nothing. I was about to sneak out and have a look, when -

"EEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAGHH!"

One of the ronin was being brutally attacked... They began to scream.

I froze, "Wh-what?!"

My plan to investigate was immediately halted.

Remaining silent and hidden was clearly more important.

Still...

"Damn you!" came the rage filled voice I came to recognize as the second ronin's.

The next fearful voice belonged to that of the third ronin, "What is this?! Why won't you die?! Dammit! We gotta get out of here!"

It was then that true fear began to set in.

There was something out there, something very, very dangerous.
Something quite possibly lethal.

The possibilities were... Well, my imagination conjured up no shortage of gruesome theories.

Even so, I could feel that itch of curiosity... I wanted to know what was out there.

Slowly, carefully, I edged up to the corner and looked out. Cold moonlight glared back at me from the bare blade of a drawn sword. My eyes followed the blade up, to the arm that held it, clad in a coat of light blue.

...Had this person saved me?

But no sooner had it appeared, that hope was dashed.

"Heh...Hehehehehe..."

The cornered ronin trembled as he tightened his grip on his sword, "H-Help...!"

I could hear the ronin beg for his life as he stumbled back. The person in the blue coat said nothing, just stepped forward, his sword raised.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

A high, screeching laugh cut through the man's scream.

The blade fell through the air, more like a butcher's cleaver than a sword: No technique, no skill. just death. The scream turned suddenly wet, caught, and disappeared like air leaving a half-empty bellows.

My eyes went wide. I had just witnessed a murder.

Whatever strength adrenaline had given me was suddenly gone. My legs gave way, and I crumpled to the ground.

My eyes had gone so wide I thought they might never close.

The ronin had died with the first blow, but as I watched the blades kept falling, carving deep lines into the corpse.

The soft slip of a blade through flesh; the crack as it struck bone; the silent creep of blood across ground.

I felt nothing from them but madness.

Their only desire was raw, animal violence. Whatever they were, it wasn't human.

They were...broken.

"Hgkk..."

I could feel my throat closing up. I couldn't breathe.

A warm, dark smell brushed against my face... It took me a moment to recognize the coppery tang of blood. An icy bolt of fear ran down my spine, crawling its way out into my limbs and freezing me in place.

I was terrified.

What was I going to do...?

What could I do?

"...You have to run, Chizuru."

I forced my jaw open and drew a ragged breath.

This was the only chance I'd get. I had to -

"Aah!"

But my body, still numb with fear, was less than responsive.

I lurched sideways, into the wood stacked against the building. With a rough clatter, it collapsed.

The creatures turned, their blue coats drenched in blood. Hideous grins split their inhuman faces, glowing red eyes shown behind white bangs and they shook with an animal excitement at finding fresh prey to slaughter.

"A-Ah!"

I had to run.

I couldn't die yet.

...But my legs refused to move.

That hideous, cackling laughter began again. I was going to die.

My body was frozen with terror. I couldn't even scream. This was it. This was the end.

"Wh-Wha...?"

I watched them raise their bloody swords, the moon glinting off the metal.

Then there was a flash of light, and a soft splash of blood. I could feel it, warm and sticky.

Bile began to rise in my throat, but before disgust took hold I heard a voice...

"Really...?"

The words suggested disappointment, but the voice sounded...happy.

"And here I was, planning to take care of them all on my own. Couldn't you have picked another day to work so fast, Saito?"

As he spoke the strange man smiled, almost as if he were enjoying himself.

I slowly glanced at them.

If I weren't still on the verge of barfing I might have been able to feel relief that these two strange men in blue coats were quite handsome and not inhumanly grotesque.

"I only did my job. Unlike you, I take no pleasure in battle."

"Well that's not a very nice thing to say."

He laughed

"...You don't even bother to deny it." The man called Saito sighed with the air of a long-suffering companion, and looked over at me.

The other man smiled and crossed his arms also glancing at me, "Maybe, but if you'd just staid back and let them kill her you could have saved us some trouble."

His tone was light, but his words confirmed my fears. I had left the frying pan, yes, but I was now in the fire.

"Perhaps. But that decision is not ours to make."

"Huh...?"

Then...there was someone in charge of these two?

Their conversation seemed to suggest they were part of an organization of some sort. As I thought about it, I remembered hearing stories of a group of men with blue coats...

"Ah-!"

My thoughts were interrupted by a dark shape sliding into view.

"Oh..."

I swallowed hard.

The moonlight shone off his smooth, dark hair. For reasons I couldn't fathom, in that moment the light on his hair made me think of fluttery flower petals... Almost as if the cherry trees were blooming out of season.

"Luck is not your friend tonight."

His voice was cold and quiet, like a blade of ice.

Blue-white moonlight lit his slender face and shone from the blade he

held pointed at my chest.

But it wasn't the sword that made my breath catch in my throat.

It was his eyes.

They were fierce and hard, but somewhere behind them I could catch a glimpse of...something else. There could be no doubt that he was prepared to kill me, and yet he looked troubled.

Not kindness, but perhaps...mercy?

"Run, and I will kill you. Do you understand?"

I nodded. There was no doubt he'd meant every word he said. He stared at me for a moment, then grimaced, and with a sigh put his sword away.

"Wh-What...?"

I was too surprised to stop myself from speaking, and it quickly became apparent that I wasn't the only one.

"What? Wait, Hijikata, are you sure about this? This kid saw...well, everything. That can't be good."

As he spoke to the man he'd called Hijikata, his eyes narrowed. The man called Hijikata frowned back at him.

"Shut up. If you keep that up, you know what we're going to have to do."

...

I wasn't quite sure what they meant, but it was clear enough that what I'd seen was something they wanted to keep hidden.

Still, the more they said, the more I understood, despite the fact that none of us wanted such a thing.

The man whose name I had yet to learn smiled a wolfish grin, "I really think it's gonna come back to bite us in the ass if we let this kid go."

The way he looked at me made me feel as if he'd read my mind.

...

...Perhaps it would be best if I didn't think too hard about things I wasn't supposed to think about.

Hijikata glanced at me then back to the other man, "So we should just kill people so they don't bother us later? No, I'll decide what we're going to do with this kid when we get back."

The other man started to open his mouth to protest but Saito cut in, "I agree with the commander. If we remain here, we are likely to be seen. Again."

He spoke with quiet confidence. He glanced around, possibly looking for other witnesses. Then he looked down at the creature he'd killed, almost as though he'd forgotten the whole ordeal.

"If they have this sort of reaction to blood, then they don't seem like they'll be very practical."

Hijikata groaned, "...Damn. I didn't think they'd gotten this bad."

He peered down at the corpse, his face an emotionless mask. When he looked back up at his companions, however, his eyes narrowed.

"As for you two... Drop the 'Hijikata' and 'commander' stuff. We're supposed to be keeping a low profile."

Saito grimaced but the other man folded his arms again and smiled.

"What?! Come on, you can't be serious... You don't think our blues are a bit of a give-away already?"

He was right... Even I had heard stories about a gang of cruel men in blue coats who cut people down in the streets.

But-

"No...no. Don't think. Ignore them."

I did my best to be stern with myself, but it came out sounding more pleading than commanding. My mind swirled with thoughts and worries. I was being drawn into their world...

...A world where there is nothing strange in carrying on a normal conversation in the dead of night, with corpses for company.

Saito's voice brought me out of my thoughts and to the horror that was this night.

"What shall we do with the bodies, then? There doesn't seem to be any physical signs, but..."

Hijikata thought for a moment before he spoke.

"Just take their blues. Yamazaki can deal with the rest."

Saito nodded, "As you wish."

"Another man cut down in the street, huh? Doing a great job, aren't we?"

The still nameless man gave a derisive bark of laughter.

"So long as we keep our mouths shut_ I don't think anyone will connect us with this."

Hijikata looked directly at me when he spoke, and I got the distinct feeling that his words weren't meant for his companions.

It was common for people to be murdered in Kyoto. It was a dangerous

city, after all. I knew that, of course...

But to see it happen? That was something else entirely.

If death was such an easy thing in Kyoto, I thought, then the city itself must surely be mad.

"Ah yes... We did save you, didn't we? Aren't you going to thank us?"

"Huh...?"

I didn't realize immediately that the third and still nameless one was speaking to me. When I did, my eyes went wide.

"What do you mean, you saved me...?"

...

Well, he did have a point. Despite their threats, they had saved my life.

I stood up as steadily as I could manage, brushed some of the dirt off my clothes, and bowed.

"Um... Thank you very much. I apologize for not thanking you earlier. I was... There was so much going on. I was a little confused."

I glanced up at them, tentatively.

The man called Saito was showing some confusion of his own. His eyes were wide, and he had an expression I couldn't place.

Hijikata looked as though he'd taken a bite of something sour.

...

...

"I-I know it seems weird to...say that... But he told me I should say thanks, so I-"

I looked up. Saito and Hijikata were both looking pointedly at anything but me, and the third man was shaking with laughter.

...

"Ha! Oh man... Well, my apologies. I certainly did tell you to, didn't I?"

He broke out in laughter again, so much so that he was forced to wipe a few tears from his eyes as he straightened up.

"Well, you're welcome, I'm Okita Souji. Nice to see a kid who knows how to be polite."

...

"Thanks for helping me..."

Not quite sure what else to do, I bowed again.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Okita?" acquired Hijikata.

"Commander, I understand your concerns, but we must move."

Whatever mirth I might have inspired gone, the man called Saito spoke with quiet urgency. Hijikata nodded.

The man who'd called himself Okita grabbed hold of my wrist, gave me a smile, and began, to lead me down the street.

His grip was a touch too tight to be friendly; his fingers like iron cables around my arm. there was no question about my situation.

If I ran, I would die. Quickly, at least, but still.

Even if I did as I was told, my life was in the hands of these strange men. I set my jaw and stood up as straight as I could. My eyes met those of Saito as he looked up from the bloodstained coat.

"It would be best if you prepared for the worst. I doubt this will end well for you."

His words were like a dagger in my stomach.

What was going to happen to me? Was I...was I going to die?

As we walked through the cold Kyoto night, I felt horror begin to crawl its way up my spine once again. The cause of my horror wasn't the gruesome end that almost certainly awaited me, but something else entirely.

I'd spoken with these men, and had watched them speak to one another, not feet from a still-warm corpse soaked in blood. That I had done such a thing terrified me in an altogether different way.

Perhaps, I thought, this is what it is like to go mad.

2. Chapter 1-1

_Hmm I wonder if anyone is going to like that this is being posted...
Oh well...I guess I'll find out sooner or later TTWTT_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 1-1<p>

"...Hmm...?"

Was it morning...?

"Umm..."

What had happened to me... ... Ah. Yes.

"...Right."

All at once, the events of the previous night rushed back. If only this was my room, I thought.

They had tied me up quite well, so all I could do was wriggle around in the bed, twisting the blankets around me. I wished - pointlessly, I knew - that I were back home, waking up on my warm futon.

"If only this were all a very strange nightmare..."

But it was not.

I had met those men the night before, and they had taken me with them...

...To the headquarters of the Shinsengumi.

"What will happen to me now...?"

I sighed, and lay down to await my fate.

It was at that moment that the door slid open, and a kind-looking man stepped through.

"I see you've woken up."

With a soft smile, he introduced himself as Inoue.

"I'm sorry we have to treat you this way... Hold on a moment. I'll loosen the ropes, all right?"

"Um..."

His smile quirked as he removed my ropes, working quickly and skillfully. My wrists, however, were left bound.

"Um... Thank you."

I bowed, and he let out a short laugh.

"Now, if you'll follow me..."

"Um...?"

"They've been discussing what to do with you since morning..." he smiled kindly again, "For now, they've decided to hear what exactly it was you saw last night."

"...Okay."

I nodded, and did my best to stand up, my body still a bit unsteady after being tied up all night.

The man who called himself Inoue was very polite and almost kind, but it was quite clear that I was to do as I was told. He must have been able to guess my thoughts, because he smiled at me and winked.

"You don't need to worry. I know they seem scary, but they're all

really very nice."

"Oh..."

I wasn't sure what to think of that. Even at home I'd heard rumors of the vicious Shinsengumi.

They weren't pleasant rumors.

It was hard to imagine that the people in charge of such an organization were...nice.

Xxxx

* * *

><p>"..."<p>

Inoue led me to a room and opened the door. I stepped inside, and found myself surrounded by the leaders of the Shinsengumi.

Their eyes dug into me like so many knives. I froze, just past the threshold, and swallowed.

Okita was the first to notice my sudden appearance, "Good morning! I hope you slept well?"

"Oh...um..."

Perhaps it was because I was surrounded by strange men, but it was somehow comforting to see a face I recognized.

...Even if it was the face of a rather frightening man who was almost certainly willing and able to kill me.

"...Well, it wasn't particularly...comfortable."

I chose my words carefully.

"Really..."

His face twisted sideways into a grin.

"Because when I went to have a look at you earlier, you didn't budge, no matter what I poked."

...

Wait...What?!

Okita's grin widened as my face turned red. Saito rolled his eyes.

"He's only teasing you. Souji didn't go anywhere near your room."

...

Quite silent, I started at Okita.

With his grin still playing about his face, he glanced over at Saito.

"Aah, I just wanted to see you squirm a little. Not very nice of you, Hajime, calling me out like that."

...

...

I glared at him, "I don't think Saito did anything wrong. You, on the other hand..."

Hijikata was apparently fed up with our banter, "Shut it. You sound like a bunch of kids."

His voice brooked no further insubordination. Okita shrugged and was silent, but the smile stayed in his eyes.

"So Hijikata... This is your witness?"

The man who spoke... Well, he looked more like a boy than a man.

I'd imagined the leaders of the Shinsengumi to be old-or at least middle aged-men, but... They all looked quite young.

...

In fact, they looked rather like a group of young thugs...

"He's a real stick, huh? Just a kid..."

That was Toudou.

On our way from my room, Inoue had given me a brief description of the people I was about to meet. Supposedly, Toudou was the youngest Captain in the Shinsengumi.

"_You're_ calling him a kid, Heisuke? That's rich."

The man chuckled as he spoke, but the way he looked at me suggested that there was little he missed, despite his humor.

"Right you are. To anybody else, I'll bet the two of you just look like another pair of scrawny little brats."

The man across from him nodded with brows drawn, as if he was quite serious about the subject.

However, I remembered Inoue telling me that two of the men in particular were...somewhat immature, to put it nicely. He had said the one with the short brown hair was Nagakura, and the other, with longer red hair, was Harada.

"Leave off, you grumpy old bastards."

"The hell I will, boy!" replied Nagakura, "You think you can get away with talking to us like that?!"

"Besides," started Harada, "I'm hardly mature enough to be called

'old.' Shinpachi, maybe, but...not me."

"Damn you, Sano... I thought we were friends!"

Toudou laughed, "Ha ha ha ha! C'mon, Shin! Would an adult get so worked up over something like that?"

Their back-and-forth had a feel of a routine that long predated my arrival, but they couldn't quite hide the odd inquisitive glance in my direction.

I could sense something other than simple curiosity, though - a feeling of animosity, of resentment, perhaps. Despite their cheerful levity, they had not forgiven my presence among them.

Suddenly, I wanted very much to go home.

I wanted to leave that place, and never return.

My chest tightened, and I looked down at the floor, hoping that I might just wake up at home in my bed.

"I apologize for all of this frightening behavior. Please, don't give them the pleasure of unsettling you."

"Oh..."

This man's voice was calm and warm, and I felt myself relax, even if only a little.

Hijikata appeared shocked, "Are you serious? You're the scariest out of all of us, Sanan."

There was the faintest trace of a smirk on Hijikata's lips.

As he finished speaking, the rest of the men nodded solemnly in agreement. I found it hard to believe this man could be as scary as they all seemed to think...

"Oh? How crude. I can understand their feelings, but that even our demon of a commander should think so..."

The man called Sanan smiled as he spoke and leaned back, his reposte delivered.

Hijikata said nothing, but his own smile did not leave his face.

A new voice joined the conversation, "You're lucky to have a friend like Sanan, Toshi."

â€|

Hijikata and Sanan had sounded so cold when they'd spoken to one another, not what I would have called 'friendly'.

Still, the man who had spoken had certainly sounded as though he thought they were friends.

The man then turn his attention to me, "Oh, my apologies. I haven't introduced myself. I am Isami Kondou, Chief of the Shinsengumi."

The most important man in the Shinsengumi, then.

"Toshi over there is the commander, and Sanan is our colonel."

Hijikata sighed in exasperation, "Ah...Kondou? Why are you telling him all this?"

Kondou glanced at him with a worried expression, "Uh... Why, do you think it's a bad idea?"

Nagakura crossed his arms seeming annoyed, "Well, unless you really think this kid needs to know all our secrets, maybe you should keep your mouth shut."

Toudou nodded in agreement, "Exactly! Why bother anyway? We don't owe this kid anything."

Harada glanced over at Kondou and let out a bark of laughter.

"True, but it's not like telling 'im will hurt us."

Kondou had looked rather disappointed when Hijikata spoke but he perked up at Harada's words.

I'd scarcely known him for five minutes, but already I could see that he was well-liked by his men. He had that sort of charisma that simply drew you in. A man who was impossible to hate.

"...Well, let's get back to the business at hand. Can you run through what happened last night?"

Kondou's glance moved to Saito, who gave a small nod and began to speak.

"Last night we were on patrol when we encountered some wandering ronin. They drew steel, so we fought. Some of our men subdued the ronin, in doing so exposed their failure."

As he finished, Saito turned to look at me. I swallowed and forced my mouth to open.

"I didn't see anything."

Hijikata softened a little at my response, but Saito remained expressionless and the smile on Okita's face didn't change.

"Huh. You sure you didn't see anything?" Toudou asked.

"Yes, I didn't see anything."

I hoped that if I said it enough times, they might start to believe me.

At least Toudou seemed satisfied with my statement, "Really... Well, if that's true, then I don't see what the problem is."

However, Nagakura was not, "Hold on a minute. I thought Souji said you helped out some of our men or something..."

"No! That's not true!"

I glanced over at Okita, but his smile still hadn't changed. Whatever he was thinking was a mystery to me.

"I was running away from the ronin... And then some people with Shinsengumi uniforms showed up... Really, they sort of rescued me."

Nagakura's eyes seemed to say "Ah Ha!"

"Then that means you saw them slicing up those ronin, right?"

"U-Um..."

I couldn't exactly deny that.

...But I knew that if I just shut up then, they'd know for sure that I was lying...

Harada sighed heavily, "So in other words, you actually saw everything. The whole ugly business."

"Um..."

I was completely at a loss.

Harada moved his gaze to mine, "You've got an honest heart. That's not really a bad thing, but..."

I wasn't sure what to make of Harada's words.

My presence had not been a good thing for the Shinsengumi. Would their next words be the ones that condemned me to death for being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

My voice shook, but I knew I had to try.

"I... I won't tell anyone! I promise!"

Sanan spoke this time, "It seems unlikely this attack was mere chance. Then again, I have no reason to think you're an enemy either." His smile was now more of a straight line, "Even if you do not intend to tell anyone, you could be captured; interrogated. I doubt you could withstand torture."

"*Whimper*"

His voice was still warm, but his words were cold, and I began to feel my chances at life slip away.

"It's easy enough to stay quiet, but if someone should try to coerce you, you've no reason to keep our secrets." Saito's voice was soft, un-cruel.

Okita smirked, "We don't have any kind of guarantee that you'll keep your word. It wouldn't be very smart to just let you go."

They had a point, but...

His smirk deepened and he crossed his arms, "Let's just kill the kid. You want to keep someone quiet, that's the only sure way."

"B-But-!"

I looked desperately at Kondou, who gave Okita a reproving look.

"Don't be so cold, Souji. What do we gain by murdering a civilian?"

Okita's smile disappeared, and he looked down at the floor.

He sighed and glanced back to his friend, "Oh don't give me that look. I was just kidding."

Saito appeared annoyed, "Then perhaps it should have sounded like it."

Okita made an attempt at a derisive snort and looked intently at a wall, his face slightly red.

Inoue seemed disturbed by the turn this conversation had taken, "But surely, there must be something we can do? After all, we're talking about a child..."

Sanan also seemed concerned, "I've no wish to kill him either, but we can't discount the chance that he could reveal information about us."

Sanan paused for a moment, his brows furrowed, then turned to Hijikata.

"I would like to hear the commander's opinion."

With the responsibility of his position invoked, Hijikata had no choice. He sighed, and glanced around the room.

"Last night we had to kill some men who broke the code. This kid was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Sanan narrowed his eyes, "And I imagine you mean to say that's all there is to it?"

Hijikata sighed again, "Well, he probably saw something, but I doubt he really understands what it was."

The room became silent and then Nagakura spoke, "Even so, this is serious. We have bigger things to think about. We have to keep this under wraps. If rumors get out that the soldiers of the Shinsengumi are thirsty for blood, that would be problematic."

Shinpachi's words made sense, and they all knew it.

Hijikata's face looked grim.

"I think Souji has a point," said Harada, "...Still, I'll do whatever

Hijikata and Kondou tell me to."

Toudou frowned, "I think we oughta let 'im go."

He clearly was troubled.

"It's not like he knows why they went nuts, you know?"

...Wait, what did he mean by that?

To be honest, I hadn't really thought about it.

Hijikata saw my eyes go wide, and I saw his narrow. They flicked to Toudou.

"Shut it, Heisuke."

No sooner were the words out of Hijikata's mouth than Toudou clapped both hands over his own.

Okita's smile was back, "Uh oh. Well, this is going to make it even harder for us to just let you go..."

"*whimper*"

Nagakura seemed annoyed now, "A man should always be ready to face death. You should make your peace with yours."

A man...?

...

"Oh!"

They thought I was a boy.

With everything else that had happened, I'd completely forgotten how I was dressed.

Harada smiled kindly, "Very true. A brave death is always an option. When I was young, I committed Honorable suicide."

At this Nagakura laughed, "...Although it didn't really stick did it Sano?"

Their jokes were...barbaric...but they both broke into raucous laughter at them.

Saito did his best to ignore them.

"Hijikata... Since we can't seem to reach a consensus, can I send the child back to his room?"

As he spoke, Saito turned to look at me.

"If you hear something you shouldn't while you're here, then we'll have no choice but to kill you."

"Ah!"

He was right.

If I remained with them then I could easily hear something I wasn't supposed to.

I didn't think he'd mentioned it for my sake - only as a possible concern for the Shinsengumi - but I was still glad he'd brought it up.

Hijikata nodded, "True. Can you take care of him?"

Saito nodded.

Sanan sighed and smiled, "I agree. There are too many careless men here."

Nagakura grimaced, "C'mon, Sanan... What're you looking at me for?"

Harada smiled, "That oughta be pretty obvious. We're in charge of being careless. Especially you, Heisuke."

Toudou suddenly looked guilty, "H-Hey! Back off! It was just a mistake, all right?"

I could hear his voice rise as everyone turned to look at him. He looked at them for a bit, then turned to me and mumbled in a voice I could barely hear, "I...I'm sorry."

...

"Um..."

I was still afraid that I was about to die, so I couldn't bring myself to tell him no harm had been done, but he looked as though he'd meant what he said, so I gave him an awkward nod. It was the most I could manage.

My attention was brought back to Saito by his soft voice, "Shall we go?"

"A-All right."

Xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>After they had taken me back to me room, I sat there for a time, looking down at my bound hands.<p>

"Hmm..."

The rumors I'd heard had said the Shinsengumi were cruel, vicious men, but they'd seemed much more human than that.

Then again, even as I sat there they were deciding whether or not to kill me...

"I don't think they want to kill me, but... It seems like they think they might not have a choice."

If I didn't defend myself somehow, I'd most likely be killed.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to convince them, though..."

However they might have felt about me, it was clear that their priority was the welfare of the Shinsengumi.

"Oh...right..."

They all still thought I was a boy.

Perhaps if I told them I was a girl, they might reconsider...

...Or perhaps they wouldn't, or perhaps that would make my predicament worse somehow.

I had no idea what to do next.

But really it was clear what had to be done...I would have to try to escape.

And that meant I needed to get moving immediately. Staying in that room wasn't likely to improve my chances.

Fortunately, they hadn't bothered to tie me up completely again. Only my hands were bound. That would slow me down, certainly, but so long as I could move my legs, I definitely had a chance.

"All right, now the exit is..."

I cast my memory back to when they'd brought me into the building the night before.

"...Right."

It should work. It had to work.

I stood up.

Holding my breath, I edged toward the door. Leaving this way was rather rude, but I hardly had a choice.

With my toe, I reached for the door...

I was almost there when suddenly it flew open all on its own, revealing a

"What?!"

"Aaaah!"

I stumbled straight into Kondou.

I shook my head and looked up to find Sanan had also entered the room, "Oh my... Well, that was rather bold. You meant to run away, I assume?"

"Um..."

He smiled in a gentle yet cold sort of way, "Trying to run was not wise. It will only make your situation more difficult."

His voice was calm and not unfriendly, but his eyes were as cold as ice.

"..."

Too late, I realized why they hadn't bothered to tie me up again. They'd been watching me.

I looked back to the doorway and saw Hijikata gazing grimly at me, "I told you once, and I won't do it again. Run, and I'll gut you."

His voice was low, and filled with quiet rage.

Okita suddenly came into view, "Sorry, but now we've got to kill you. We can't trust a kid who can't keep a promise."

He smiled. Though, he didn't look very sorry.

I clearly had no choice but to make a run for it!

If I was going to die anyway, then I had nothing to lose by trying to escape.

Slipping around a stunned Kondou, I took off down the hallway.

"Did you really think you could escape?"

"Ah!"

Hijikata snatched me from the floor in one smooth motion, with the grace of a great cat.

"L-Let me go!"

"You think I'm stupid? You'll just try to run. No."

His voice was angry. I squirmed and twisted, but I could not escape.

"But I don't want to die!"

My voice threatened to waver with fear, but I hoped volume would mask it.

"And I...I... There's something I have to do!"

Hijikata's expression softened, "Hmph. And what's that, huh? What makes a girl put on pants and run around Kyoto pretending she's a boy?"

"Um..."

...

"...Huh?"

...

"Um...sir..."

He did not look happy.

"Did...did you just say 'girl'?"

I was scared, there was no denying it. Sanan looked at us and nodded.

"I see. Then you really were a girl."

"Huh...?"

Okita chuckled, "C'mon, you really thought putting on a pair of pants was going to fool us? Even an idiot could see you're a girl."

"What?!"

Had... Had they really known all along?

I wasn't quite sure what to think.

Kondou, however, "Oh Isami Kondou, you fool! This is the embarrassment of a lifetime! How could I not have realized?!"

"..."

...Well, perhaps they hadn't all known. His reaction, I confess, made me feel a little better.

Hijikata blinked at his friend in disbelief and turned back to me, "You almost got killed for it, whatever it is. Maybe it's time you spilled your guts, kid."

I looked back at him and nodded.

Xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>There I was, surrounded once again by the leaders of the Shinsengumi.<p>

"I did think you were rather pretty, but to think you were in fact a lady all this time..."

As Kondou spoke, he was nodding his head solemnly, over and over, as if he were agreeing with a very intelligent suggestion.

Toudou stared for a moment and then, "Once you know she's a girl, she really doesn't look like a boy at all, does she?"

Something about that seemed to impress him.

Inoue appeared very troubled, "Then we bound a girl and left her for an entire night...? Oh dear."

He looked at me, his eyes concerned.

Each of them took the news...differently.

Nagakura narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, "Well, 'she' claims to be a girl, but it's not like we have any actual proof, right?"

"P-Proof?!"

Harada laughed. Nagakura grumbled to himself under his breath.

Still grinning, Harada said, "Proof? Really? Not obvious enough for ya, huh? All right, will you feel better if I strip her down?"

"Please, don'tâ€"!"

"No! You absolutely will not! Even suggesting such a thing is preposterous!"

Kondou shot up before I had even finished, his face bright red, but Harada's words hadn't had any malice behind them.

The red haired man frowned, "I just figured it was the quickest way to settle the question..."

He shrugged, and settled back into his seat. Nagakura had crossed his arms, and his brows were knit.

"Well...if you really are a girl, then... Killing just feels kinda...wrong."

Hijikata scowled, "It doesn't matter. If we have to kill her, she dies."

His words left no room for argument.

Sanan had his own opinion on the matter, "Gender is irrelevant. Killing in general is wrong." He glanced at his commander, "We were organized to protect the public good in the city of Kyoto. We would ill serve the public good by murdering civilians in cold blood."

Okita smirked again, "Yeah, yeah. But if this girl, or boy, is a threat to the peace, that's an entirely different story."

The Shinsengumi didn't enjoy a shining reputation already. If rumors began to spread that their men were thirsty for blood, things weren't likely to go well for them.

They wouldn't be able to operate in Kyoto, and with no one to protect the people, the city would eventually fall into chaos.

I could see in their eyes that each one of them knew full well the consequences rash actions could have.

Kondou cleared his throat, "Well then, we need only determine if you are a threat. Will you tell us your side of the story?"

I could feel their eyes on me. The room went quiet.

"My name is Chizuru Yukimura."

I told them everything. How I lived in Edo. How I'd come to Kyoto to find my father...

"Oh, then you're from Edo as well? And you came all the way to Kyoto to find your father?!"

I could see emotion welling up in Kondou's eyes as he spoke. "What business did your father have in Kyoto?"

"My father was a doctor. His name is Kodo Yukimura, and he specializes in western medicine"

Hijikata's eyes widened, "What?!"

"Huh...?"

The moment my father's name crossed my lips, the atmosphere in the room changed.

"Oh my... So the good doctor Kodo has a daughter?"

I looked at Sanan, "You know my father...?"

I wasn't sure what the sudden silence meant, only that the revelation of my parentage had caused a pronounced change in their behavior.

It was Saito who finally broke the silence.

"The Shinsengumi is currently attempting to determine the whereabouts of Dr. Kodo Yukimura."

"You're after my father?! Why?!"

Okita shook his head and smiled at me, "Oh, now, you've got us all wrong. We're not, uh, after him."

"Oh... I see."

Tension that I hadn't noticed appear began to dissipate.

Okita continued, "He's a fellow supporter of the shogun, but... Well, he kind of disappeared a little while ago."

"There's a reasonable chance that the enemies of the shogun have identified him as a threat." Saito added.

"Ah!"

My eyes went wide, but Saito kept talking as if I'd done nothing.

"There is also a chance, of course, that he's still alive. Doctors trained in western medicine are valuable and rare."

I wasn't sure what else to do, so I nodded.

My heart pounded in my chest, threatening to burst out onto the floor.

"Father..."

Was he safe?

Sanan glanced at me reassuringly, "But with you, we have a much better chance of finding the good doctor."

"...Huh?"

Sanan continued. Apparently my father had only visited a small number of times. I understood then what he'd meant: It would be difficult for them to track down someone they barely knew.

"You are his daughter, however. You ought to be able to recognize him no matter how he may have disguised himself, yes?"

"...Yes, I could."

I nodded as I spoke, and gave him what I hoped was a steady, reassuring smile.

Hijikata appeared annoyed yet slightly relieved, "Well, if she is his daughter, we can't really kill her, can we..."

"...Which means more work for me." his eyes added. They narrowed as he looked down at me.

"If you swear you'll forget about what you saw last night, then we'll look after you until you can find your father. Fair?"

Kondou nodded in agreement, "I promise that the Shinsengumi will do whatever they can to help you find Dr. Kodo!"

"Th-Thank you so much!"

I'd never imagined something like this!

Not only had I survived, I'd found my first decent lead.

Okita smirked at me, "You must be pretty glad we won't be killing you, huh? ...Well, won't be killing you just now, at any rate."

He gave me that same wolfish grin.

There was no denying my situation was still less than desirable, but at the moment I didn't care.

"Yes. I'm very glad."

I'd been through a lot, but at last I'd found help, and where I'd never have expected it: the Shinsengumi.

Kyoto hadn't been kind to me, even though I'd been there less than a day, but it looked as though my fortunes were taking a turn for the better. I still had a long way to go, and I had worries aplenty, but it was important to stay optimistic.

Kondou suddenly appeared concerned, "I'd prefer to place you in the custody of the Judiciary Commissioner or the Aizu rather than keep you in a house full of men, but..."

He let the sentence hang in the air, and looked at me, his arms folded.

It was clear I had no choice but to stay with the Shinsengumi.

Saito glanced at me, "Should you require anything, you need only ask. We will do what we can to accommodate you."

"Oh..."

His expression didn't change, but his words were unexpectedly warm. I looked away from him awkwardly, but I still felt the heat rise in my cheeks.

"Thank you..."

Nagakura grinned, "W-well, I guess we'll have to be nicer to you now that we know you're a girl."

Toudou laughed, "You're always nice to the ladies, Shin. Sure didn't take long for you to change your tune once you figured out she was a girl though, huh?"

Harada chuckled as well, "Ah, whatever. Having a lady here at headquarters is sure gonna brighten things up, won't it?"

"Um..."

I wasn't entirely sure that would be the outcome.

"Still, we can hardly treat her as one of our soldiers," said Sanan, "Something else must be done with her."

Hijikata seemed annoyed again, "Then make her a page or something. You want an assistant, Kondou? How about you, Sanan?"

He gave a small shrug. Whatever was done with me, it seemed he no longer cared.

Okita smirked at him, "Oh, come on now, Hijikata. It's your idea, you can't just pawn her off on someone else."

Kondou clearly agreed on this, "Ah, excellent! I believe we can trust Toshi with her!"

Kondou's face split with a wide smile, and he slapped his leg in agreement.

Sanan smiled at him, "Well, there you have it, Hijikata. I hope you'll take good care of her."

His smile had more than a little of a mocking twist to it.

...

...

"...You sons of _bitches._" Hijikata clearly did not appreciate me being dumped on him.

"Um..."

As I watched their back-and-forth, some of my earlier relief began to ebb away...

What was going to happen to me?

3. Chapter 1-2

Moving slow as far as view are concerned... But, well whatcha gonna do... Anyway...

DISCLAIMER: Same as in first chapter...

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 1-2<p>

February 1864

I slid the door open, and a breath of cool morning air met me. Clumps of thick clouds trundled silently over the city, an unusually strong wind driving them along.

I shivered, "It's cold today..."

I grabbed a jacket from near the door to wrap around myself. A week had passed since I'd begun living in the headquarters of the Shinsengumi.

They allowed me to roam around the compound as I pleased, and I was given a room of my own.

They weren't the best accommodations, but given that they'd very nearly murdered me instead, I thought it best not to complain.

"Still..."

I looked down at my feet on the cold floor and sighed.

"Do I really need to dress like this all the time?"

They'd given me a place to live, for the time being, but it hadn't been without conditions...

Flashback

Previous night...

Hijikata sighed seeming very tired, "The Shinsengumi will look after you, but we can't have a woman running around our headquarters."

As he explained, if rumors were to spread that the Shinsengumi were

keeping a woman in their compound, tongues would begin to wag.

It might even bring the people who were after my father to the Shinsengumi in search of me.

Of course, they hadn't been able to determine whether or not he'd even been attacked.

There were a great many questions left unanswered.

We could ill-afford any reckless decisions.

Or so Hijikata had told me.

"In other words," he continued, "we need you to keep pretending to be a man. I doubt that's what you had wanted to hear, but you do it or you're out on your ass. Clear?"

I nodded, "...yes."

His reasoning was sound.

But perhaps more than that, I knew he was looking out not only for the Shinsengumi, but also for the safety of my father and myself.

I didn't have a choice, of course, but knowing that made following his orders at least somewhat more palatable.

Sanan smiled at me from where he sat to the left of Hijikata, "I doubt you would do so intentionally, but the presence of a woman could...ah...disrupt morale, so to speak."

His tone suggested he was joking, but it was clear that he was telling the truth as well.

"For that reason," he continued, "only we, the Shinsengumi's leadership, will know the truth of your situation."

If word were to get out, there was no telling how fast rumors could spread, or to where. I had to stay a boy.

"All right then. What should I do while I'm here?"

Okita opened his mouth but Hijikata beat him to it, "Nothing. You're gonna get a room, and you're gonna stay in it."

Okita smirked at him, "Really? I could have sworn we decided she was going to be someone's page..."

...

Hijikata turned toward Okita and his eyes narrowed to angry slits, "Souji... Keep your tongue in your mouth or I'll cut the fucking thing off."

Flashback End

Before long, I'd been there for a week.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice... I'd prefer otherwise, of

course, but I'll do what I have to."

I wasn't quite sure what to make of it yet, but since I'd been dressing like a boy, I'd grown rather used to the feel of wearing pants, and of having the kodachi my father had given me always at my hip.

He'd presented me with it when I was only a child, and impressed upon me at least some sense of its importance.

Supposedly, it had been in the Yukimura family for generations.

As such, I was forced to take lessons in swordplay, so I knew which end was meant for the enemy, but...

I had never much cared for weapons.

They hurt people, of course, but it was more than that, at least for me.

For as far back as I could remember, any wounds I suffered healed at an incredible rate. Small cuts would disappear overnight.

As a child I'd thought nothing of it, but as I grew older I began to realize that I was not quite normal. When I asked my father, he told me that it was a gift from the gods, but that I should tell no one of it.

I didn't tell anyone, of course. I was afraid they would treat me like a monster if they knew.

Ever since then, I'd done my best not to get hurt. I stayed as far away from blades as I could, and before I realized it, I was rather afraid of them.

Dressing as a man all the time was frustrating, as was carrying a sword, but it was my condition that worried me the most.

"Still..."

That wasn't the only thing on my mind.

The rank-and-file soldiers had been treating me coldly.

"I'm not just...imagining it, right...?"

I'd heard having a private room was a rare privilege, even for the captains. For a child to appear out of nowhere, and be given better treatment than their own captains... it was little wonder the soldiers resented me.

"True. I suppose I can't really blame them..."

Also, quite simply, I felt bad.

I was enjoying the hospitality, such as it was, of the Shinsengumi, and so I felt I should help them in some way, but I knew nothing of soldiers and their ways.

There wasn't much opportunity for me to learn, either: Hijikata had instructed me to leave my room as little as possible.

From time to time, the captains or other officers would send me on one errand or another, but I was nothing approaching a page.

Most of the duties they gave me were things more suited for a maid than a soldier, and it made the rest of the men even more resentful, for what appeared to be special treatment.

"They're just...watching me."

To make sure I kept my mouth shut, they took turns keeping watch over me. My mistakes could mean serious trouble for them, so they were doing their best to keep me away from the other soldiers.

"Hmm..."

Then again, perhaps I was just a poor actor. Their soldiers almost never spoke to me, but when they did, it was difficult for me to act...manly. All too often, the captains had to step in to cover for me.

Each time they did, it made it seem as though I couldn't even manage to speak for myself, and I felt even worse.

"If I'm really going to stay here, I'd like to be friends with at least some of them... But I can't exactly tell them the truth, can I?"

Indeed I couldn't, and so I had no choice but to stay out of the way and keep to myself. it wasn't a pleasant existence, and I was beginning to feel depressed.

"If I'm supposed to stay out of the way, then I shouldn't be leaving my room, but..."

I very much wanted to go look for my father.

However, even after a week had passed, I was still not allowed to leave headquarters.

I'd come to Kyoto in search of my father, but for the time being it seemed that search had been stopped in its tracks.

"Hmm..."

Perhaps, I thought, I could talk to Hijikata. If he would give me permission to look for my father...

"...Oh, no, that's right..."

Hijikata had left on a trip to Osaka several days before.

...

...

"Perhaps...I can sneak out while he's not here..."

...

I wasn't sure what to do...

If I was honest, staying in the room was awfully boring.

"No, you need to follow Hijikata's orders, Chizuru."

I shook my head to clear it, and tried to forget about temptation. I didn't want to cause any more trouble than I already had. The consequences would...not be good.

"*sigh*

I looked around the room, feeling somewhat forlorn. It was a very nice room, but it was nearly completely empty. Not uncomfortable, per se, but not comfortable either, and there was nothing with which I might make the time pass.

"And Here I thought I'd gotten used to doing nothing..."

My father's business had taken him out of the house frequently, sometimes for days at a time, and so I'd spent a good deal of time home on my own.

"This isn't quite the same, though... Back then, I always knew he'd be back, eventually."

Waiting for someone you knew would return, and waiting for...for what, you didn't quite know, are two very different things.

"When will I be able to start looking for Father again, I wonder..."

I let out another frustrated sigh.

Sudden approaching footsteps from outside my room drew my attention to the open doorway.

"Yukimura!"

It was Kondou!

"I've been looking for you!" he continued. "I didn't think you'd be _here_!"

He smiled brilliantly at me, as he stepped into the room a tray in one hand.

"Um...I'm...sorry...?"

I wasn't sure what to make of his words, so instead I gave him an awkward sort of bow.

He stepped further into the room, still smiling, then paused and gave me an odd look.

"Wait a moment..." he started, "Is this your room?"

...

Until then I hadn't thought about it, but since they'd brought me in, this was the first time I'd seen Kondou.

"For now, yes." I sighed.

The moment the words were out of my mouth, his eyes went wide.

"O-Oh no... Then...then I barged into a woman's room without announcing myself!"

Not wanting him to fully embrace Captain Panic, I quickly said, "Oh no, it's fine."

I gestured at the rest of the room as he took a step back toward the door.

"After all," I continued with what I hoped was a kind smile, "It isn't as though there's anything here I wouldn't want you to see."

He still seem unsure, so I beckoned for him to come back in.

He sighed in frustration, "Arg... We'd decided you would be Toshi's page, so I'd assumed your room would be next to his..."

"Um..."

Hijikata had, of course, failed to tell Kondou that I had yet to be made a page. I wasn't surprised.

It wasn't too hard to see what was going on.

"I'm not really prepared to entertain, but you're welcome to come in, if you'd like."

Yup.

An official invitation seemed to dispel most of his concern, and his smile creased his face again.

"Oh no, you needn't feel nervous around me. While you're here, you're a guest of the Shinsengumi."

With that, he placed the tray on the floor between us and sat down.

I looked at what was on the tray and my eyes widened, "Th-This is..."

I could barely stifle a sudden squeal of delighted excitement. Kondou coughed, doing his best to look nonchalant.

"Do you...ah...like sweets? I found some of these in the cupboard, and I thought..."

I tore my eyes away from the candy and smiled at him, "I do. In fact, I like these especially."

Some of the tension left his face, and he grinned at me. On the plate, he'd arranged several colorful candies and a cup of warm green tea.

"So, what do you think?" he said cheerfully, "If you'd like to have some, go ahead."

He looked right at me and smiled hopefully, as if to say "I hope you like them!"

"Thank you very much."

I reached out cautiously, and took one of the candies.

"...He he..."

It had been a while since I'd had any sweets.

Something about the small, colorful candy seemed so adorable that I couldn't help but smile.

Kondou didn't laugh at my admittedly childish reaction. Instead, he just smiled warmly.

His eyes suddenly looked concerned, "Oh, yes... I've heard you haven't been allowed to go outside."

I set the empty tea cup down, "That's true."

I could see his brows draw together in deeper concern.

I quickly added, "...There's no point in rushing it, though."

If I ran off without their permission, I'd almost certainly cause problems for the men who'd promised to help me.

For the time being, I would simply have to be patient.

Kondou sighed, "I know how he appears, but Toshi is the sort of man who can't help but care for others."

Hijikata...caring? That didn't seem right. But then again, I told myself, Kondou knows him much better than you.

"He may be a little strict with you," he continued, "but only because he has your best interests at heart."

That made a little more sense.

"I think... If the commander doesn't think it's time for me to go out yet, then I trust him."

I hadn't spent much time with him, but it wasn't hard to see that Hijikata was no fool. He was intimidating, of course, but he was a good person.

Kondou nodded and grinned, "I'll speak with Toshi. You're bored, I

know, but I have to ask you to hang on a little longer."

"All right. Thank you."

He hadn't done much, to be honest, but Kondou's visit had cheered me greatly. I suppose I was rather easily pleased if an afternoon with warm tea was all it took to make me happy.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>I watched shadows drift up my wall as the orange light of the sun painted my room the color of autumn leaves.<p>

"How long am I going to do this...?"

Solitude was proving detrimental to any sort of continued optimism. All my thoughts eventually turned dark and hopeless.

It was depressing, but most of all it was frustrating. How could I let myself be discouraged so easily?

Fairly easily, actually. I'd been swept up in a frightening world I didn't understand and couldn't possibly control.

"I can't possibly figure out what's happening to Father if I'm stuck here..." I mumbled to myself. "Only Hijikata can give me permission to leave, and he's gone..."

All I could do was wait.

Lamenting things I couldn't change wouldn't improve my situation, and would arguably make it worse.

"Hm..."

Still, there was at least one thing I had to be thankful for.

"At least they've all been nice to me..." I chided.

I knew I couldn't trust the men of the Shinsengumi completely. They were, after all, men who could take life in the blink of an eye.

It would be all too easy for the next life they took to be mine.

"They're nice men, deep down...right?" I asked no one in particular.

"Has anyone ever called you gullible?"

"Ah-!"

My voice froze in my throat.

I turned slowly to find Okita standing behind me.

"Wh-What are you doing here?!" I snapped.

He laughed, "Oh, you didn't notice me? Well, it's my turn to keep watch."

"..."

Of course, I was under surveillance. Which meant...

"Did you hear everything I said...?"

"Hm?"

He said nothing, only smiled and blinked laconically.

"..."

He'd heard me. He had definitely heard me!

I wanted to scream again, but before I could open my mouth Saito stepped out from behind the door.

"I think that's enough fraternizing, Souji."

He gave a small smile.

...

I blinked at him, my heart racing, "Were you here the whole time too?!"

"I arrived only moments ago." was his answer.

"Oh, thank goodness..."

I pressed my hand to my chest, in an effort to calm my pounding heart.

"U-Um, I'm sorry... For...for screaming like that..."

His smile widened a fraction, "It's nothing. And at any rate, it isn't as though you were saying anything that might cause trouble for you."

"Ah!"

Then...he _had_ heard me?!

"T-True, I didn't say anything, um, bad, but still-!"

It's embarrassing being caught talking to oneself! I was so embarrassed... Saito looked from me to Okita and back and his brows drew together almost imperceptibly.

"I came to tell you that dinner is ready, but... Have I interrupted something?"

"What?! Oh! No! Nothing at all!"

I shook my head emphatically.

Slight amusement and annoyance permeated in Saito's eyes, "I had

intended to wait until you and Souji finished your discussion, but..."

He let the words hang in the air, but his eyes said that he'd determined we'd continue forever if he didn't interrupt. I had opened my mouth to say...I'm not sure what, whenâ€

Heisuke shot through the door. The moment he saw the three of us, his face fell.

"Hey! Guys! Dinnertime!" he said in annoyance.

Saito blinked at him, "My apologies, Heisuke. I'll be there presently."

The younger captain smiled and then turned to me with a grin, "Yeah, yeah. You too, Chizuru. Hurry up or it's all gonna be gone by the time you get there."

I smiled back, "Sorry, Toudou. I'll be there as soon as I can."

He turned to leave, but stopped just as he reached the door. I saw him purse his lips for a moment, and then he spoke.

"Look...um, you can drop the whole 'Toudou' thing, okay? Just call me 'Heisuke.' Everybody else does."

I blinked, "Are you sure...?"

"Yeah, why not. I mean, we're about the same age anyway."

I gave him a kind smile, "All right... I'll do that then, Heisuke."

He turned and gave me a wide grin.

"Great. Sounds better already. Shall we go?"

xxxxxx

* * *

><p>Upon entering the dining hall we were greeted by a fairly annoyed Harada and Nagakura.<p>

Sano placed his hand on his hip, "You're late," he grumbled.

Nagakura folded his arms and glared up at us from where he sat; a plate of food already set before him, "You kids're late. Who's gonna answer to my crying stomach?"

Heisuke laughed and wandered over to sit next to him, "You mean 'growling,' Shin. Really, he's so simple sometimes..."

He really shouldn't have said anything, for this only proved to annoy Shinpachi further, "You guys oughta apologize to my stomach! He wanted to dig in, but I said, 'No, we've gotta wait for 'em.'"

Sano sighed and shook his head, "You're such a softie, Shin..." he

then looked to me and patted the floor next to him and once we were all seated with food before us, "All right guys, it's time to eat, and that means every man for himself."

And with that, Nagakura and Heisuke began our meal's entertainment.

Nagakura began eying what was on his plate and then turned to Heisuke, "Man, there's barely enough here to feed a kid, let alone a man. So I'll just have to...take yours!"

He lunged forward, chopsticks in hand, at Heisuke's tray of food, only to have his utensils stopped in mid lunge by _Heisuke_'s_ chopsticks.

Thus began quite an amusing scene.

"Survival of the fittest!" sniped Nagakura, "This food is mine!"

Heisuke glared at his friend as they struggled, "Hey! Why do you always steal _my_ food?!"

Nagakura grinned and then, "Ahahahaha! It's 'cause of the difference in size, kid! I got a bigger body. That means I need more food!"

As if that explained it...

Heisuke bared his teeth, "Well I'm still growing, old man, so I gotta eat more too!"

Sano sighed seeming slightly embarrassed by his two friends, "Sorry you had to see this, Chizuru. They're always like this."

"Eh heh, heh. I've gotten used to it."

Saito seemed to be ignoring all of us but then he said, "Is acceptance of such insanity not somewhat frightening?" Then he noticed the two, at the moment, silly child men eying his food, "...That food is mine." And gave them both a look that caused them to avert their attention back to their own food.

I glanced at Okita and noticed he hadn't touched his plate of food; apparently the small jug of sake was all he wanted, "Oh... Why aren't you taking anything?"

He smiled and took a sip before saying, "Yeah, I'm good. If I get too full I start getting slow."

Nagakura laughed at that, "Hey! Wadda ya mean, 'Slow'?! ...Ah whatever, I'm taking that!"

He then lunged again at Heisuke's plate but this time the poor boy was too slow and watched stunned as Nagakura started munching on 'his' fish.

Heisuke looked ready to start throwing punches but then he glanced at Okita's untouched plate.

Okita noticed this and immediately said, "Go for it. So long as I got

a little sake to sip, I'm good."

Sano smile at that, "Then I guess I'm going with sake, too."

Okita then looked to me and said, "Don't worry about being a freeloader or anything, Chizuru. Just eat your little heart out, okay?"

I gave him a small smile, "I...I know. I can't help but feel a _little_ bad, though!"

Saito who had seemed to be ignoring us again, said, "Well, if you let that get to you, you're gonna lose. You have to protect what's yours."

"O-Okay!"

...

It was...actually rather fun to have dinner with such a strange group of men. I'd eaten alone for so long that to do so with others was frightening and exhilarating all at once.

"See, there's that smile. You oughta do that more often. We aren't gonna hurt you."

I glanced up to find Sano looking at me.

"Harada..."

His mouth curled up into an honest smile of his own.

Had I really looked so down? Perhaps they were all trying to cheer me up...

I wasn't quite sure how to feel.

There was a part of me that felt bad, while another part felt a certain amount of joy.

The joy seemed to be winning out, however, and I was smiling to myself when Inoue stepped in from the hall.

"Gentlemen, do you have a moment?"

As usual, his voice was warm, but in his eyes was a level solemnity I'd never seen before, at least during our thus-far brief acquaintance.

The warmth of the room disappeared almost immediately.

"I've just received word from Osaka. Sanan has been gravely injured in battle."

"What?!"

They all went quiet.

Inoue continued. Sanan had gone to investigate a report of several ronin harassing a cloth merchant. He'd managed to drive them off, but

not before being wounded by the ronin.

I had to know, "Is he going to be alright?"

He pursed his lips, "It wasn't his sword arm that was wounded. He's almost certain to survive, but wielding a blade will be difficult for him."

"Oh, thank goodness..."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, but it seemed that the rest of the room didn't share my relief.

He then looked to the captains, "He should be returning here in a few days. Now please, excuse me. I must speak with Kondou."

He turned as he spoke, his last words delivered over his shoulder, and was gone.

It was Saito who eventually broke the awkward silence.

"A sword is not made to be carried in a single hand. If his injury is severe, he may never carry a blade again."

"Oh..."

At last, I understood.

Yes, Sanan was alive. But without the ability to wield a sword...

Sanan the man had survived the encounter with the ronin, but Sanan the warrior had not.

"Fighting with a single hand," Saito continued, "would mean less strength behind the blows. Against an opponent of similar skill, he would almost certainly lose."

"Of course..."

Fighting with one hand would be fighting at half strength. Even a skilled warrior would have trouble.

Okita sighed, "If push comes to shove, he'll have to take it. I don't think Sanan's just going to give up."

Nagakura narrowed his eyes at him, "Don't jinx him, Souji. It's gonna look bad if officers start joining the Corps."

"Huh...?"

Wait... That didn't make any sense.

"But...what do you mean 'Corps'? Isn't that the Shinsengumi?"

I didn't understand... What was the "Corps" if it wasn't the Shinsengumi itself? But the way they'd said it, they couldn't have been referring to the Shinsengumi.

Heisuke glanced at me and said, "Well normally, yeah. You might call

the Shinsengumi the 'Elite Volunteer Corps.' When we talk about "the Corps," though, weâ€œ"

"Heisuke!" shouted Sano

"Huh?!"

Before I could move, Harada was on his feet and halfway across the room. I barely had time to gasp before he drove his fist into Heisuke sending the boy rolling into a wall.

Heisuke brought a hand to his face, "Ow..."

Having already jumped to my feet I started to move forward, "Heisuke! Are you all right?!" but Nagakura stopped me.

He sighed, "Sano, you're overreacting. Heisuke, think before you open that damn mouth!"

His eyes were cold and hard as he turned to look straight at me.

It was clear Heisuke had told me something he shouldn't have, but...what?

"Sorry..."

After a moment, Harada gave the younger man a curt nod of apology, and Heisuke responded with a quick pained smile.

"Nah, I should've been watching what I said. Still... Sano, you start throwin' those things around way too easily."

His punch had hit with enough force to knock a lesser man out cold, but Heisuke seemed only slightly the worse for wear. It had never been clearer that I was not among normal people.

Nagakura gave me an annoyed look, "That's all you're going to hear about this particular topic, Chizuru. I'm sure you're curious, but we can't tell you anything else, so don't ask."

His voice was friendly enough, but his eyes gave his words a cold weight that made me feel almost uncomfortable.

"But..."

How was I supposed to just drop it?

Okita decided to cut in at that moment, "The Corps that Heisuke was talking about are men to be pitied."

His voice was flat: emotionless.

"Um..."

His eyes were grim, and there was a sudden chill melancholy about him. I couldn't bring myself to say anything more.

Thankfully, Nagakura stepped in to break the silence.

"It's nothing you need to worry yourself about." His previous look of

annoyance had been replaced with a kind smile, "you don't have to get all worked up."

"..."

I was only a guest in their house, not a warrior of the Shinsengumi.

I didn't need to know the truth behind whatever secrets the Shinsengumi kept. I'd known that from the beginning.

...That knowledge was little comfort, however.

Saito glance at me and said, "Put it from your mind. Involving yourself in our affairs will only put you in greater danger."

I bit my lip and kept silent.

The wall between us was nearly a physical thing, and it was far too large an obstacle for me to defeat easily.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>"*sigh*"<p>

I finished my dinner in sad silence, excused myself, and returned to my room

I had a great deal to think about.

"The Shinsengumi...hm..."

I knew of the Shinsengumi, of course. Their name meant "Elite Volunteer Corps."

But this "Corps" they'd mentioned... It seemed to be something different.

"So Sanan is part of the Shinsengumi... But he shouldn't be part of the 'Corps'...?"

The way they'd said it, it seemed as if this "Corps" was another entity, inside the Shinsengumi...

...

...

"Argh!"

No! I wasn't supposed to think about those things! I was only going to get myself in trouble if I stuck my nose where it didn't belong.

If I saw or heard the wrong thing, I could even end up dead.

"If I die, I'll have a hard time looking for my father..."

There were people who care about me, and my death would no doubt sadden them.

With that in mind, I did my best to but the day's event out of my head, and climbed onto my thin futon.

4. Chapter 1-3

CHAPTER 1-3

JULY 1864

It was later that day that Hijikata called for me.

"Excuse me."

I had been relieved to find Okita and Heisuke had been summoned along with me. A private conversation with only myself and Hijikata would have been cause for a significant case of nerves.

"..."

I was still trying to puzzle out what to say when Hijikata began to speak, his voice cold as tempered steel.

"You can leave the compound."

"Really?!"

His announcement was so sudden that I found I couldn't contain my enthusiasm. Hijikata, however, retained his composure.

"You're going to be accompanying whoever's on duty. You jump when they say jump, and die when they say die. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

At last, I would be able to go outside!

I would finally be able to begin searching for my father!

My answers wouldn't show themselves immediately, I knew, but at least I was free to look for them!

Hijikata looked away from me to address the other two.

"Souji. Heisuke. You're on patrol today, right?"

"Oh, I get it now," said Heisuke, "That's why you pulled us in here right?"

The confusion that had been on his face since I'd entered lifted at last.

He gestured to Okita, "I think it's going to be Souji's turn this time, though." He turned to his fellow captain, "The 1st Division's doing rounds today, isn't it?"

Okita nodded and turned to Hijikata, "Yes, Heisuke and the 8th are

going out tonight, so I think he has a point. She'll be safer during the afternoon."

He nodded at Heisuke and gave me a quick wink.

"Don't forget: If you run, I'll kill you. And if we get jumped by ronin, I'm not sticking around to pull your ass out of the fire, okay?"

He wasn't being serious, but Hijikata turned his cold glare on Okita and frowned.

"No, it's not okay, you idiot. Why the hell do you think I'm sending her with you?"

Okita's only response was a short snort of a laugh.

"I won't run."

I knew he wasn't being serious, but I couldn't stand to keep my mouth shut.

"When I came here, we made a deal. I promised. The Shinsengumi would help me find my father, and I would keep quiet and not run away."

And I still wanted to find him; just as much as I had the day I first met the Shinsengumi.

"I'll keep my promise." I looked to Okita, "So please, keep yours."

I gave him a short bow, never taking my eyes off his face.

The smirk that had been on his face when I'd begun had shrunk to something smaller and more than a little awkward.

"My apologies," he started, "I guess I underestimated you. You should realize, though, that there's no way to know what could happen out there. If you come with us, you're putting yourself in danger. If that's all right with you, then feel free to join us on our rounds."

Even I knew that Kyoto was...not safe.

But I didn't care. I had to find my father. At that moment, any possible dangers seemed immaterial.

"The Choshu have been acting up," started Hijikata grimly, "We don't know what they're up to, but chances are it's bad for us." He turned to me, "I'd rather not be sending you out."

He seemed to be almost talking to himself, but his tone was stern and thoughtful.

The soldiers of the Choshu Domain were part of the imperial nationalist party.

They had increasingly been turning to force in their pursuit of these goals.

The Shinsengumi, on the other hand, were loyal to the shogun.

Since their masters were at odds, the Shinsengumi and the Choshu Domain were enemies. It occurred to me that the increased activity of the Choshu Domain had likely made it difficult for the Shinsengumi to shoulder a burden such as me.

I gave Hijikata an inquisitive look, "What are you giving me permission to leave the compound at a time like this, then?"

Hijikata's face hardened, and he looked away.

"Kodo hasn't gone back to Edo, and we've heard that a couple people saw someone around Kyoto. It might not be him, but it matches his description."

For a moment he looked troubled, "Besides, I've kept you locked up for almost half a year. The Choshu are a threat, but if it wasn't them, it'd be something else. I have to let you out sometime, or you'll never find anything."

"..."

It wasn't what I'd expected to hear from him.

He was right that they'd postponed my search for my father for quite some time. What I hadn't expected was that he would give any thought to my feelings on the matter.

"Um... Thank you very much."

I bowed as I spoke, not sure what else I could do to express my gratitude. Hijikata only turned back to his work.

Heisuke turned to me with a bright smile, "Besides, plenty of our guys aren't feeling so hot these days. We aren't exactly in top condition, are we?"

Heisuke's joking didn't seem to appeal to Hijikata, who only frowned more deeply.

"We'll it has been awfully hot lately..."

And it certainly had been. Day after day, the sun burned down on Kyoto from a cloudless sky, and all of the rooms in the compound were so humid that I felt dizzy as soon as I stepped inside.

I had heard that the heat had been too much for some of the Shinsengumi's and they'd taken ill.

Hijikata spoke to me over his shoulder, a hint of internal struggle in his tone, "If you want to go, you can go. You have my permission."

"All right."

I sat there for a moment and considered my options.

There was something in his words and demeanor that told me he didn't want me to leave the compound.

Still, if I was with Okita or Heisuke, I had no doubt that I'd be safe and well-protected; on the other hand, my presence could easily be an undue burden to them.

What was I to do?

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>In the end, I decided not to leave.<p>

They had enough on their minds without having to worry about me.

"Still..."

I couldn't keep myself from feeling a little sad about it. I gave my head a shake.

"All right... What should I do today?"

For the past six months, I'd done little more than run inconsequential errands for the Shinsengumi.

I'd also helped clean the compound and prepare meals, and eventually I'd learned how best to help without getting in the way.

Most of my time was spent with the captains, but on the occasions where I'd bump into the rank-and-file soldiers, I'd gotten to a point where I could speak to them easily enough, probably because they thought I was just a page.

My desire to find my father had kept me from trying to run away.

"I think they've finally started to trust me... At least I hope they have."

Some of them still weren't terribly nice to me, like Okita, but by and large they'd begun to give me a little more freedom.

...

...It sure was hot...

...

"What should I do today..."

...

My mind was completely blank. It was too hot to think.

"Of course!"

I'd go to the central courtyard!

There was usually a breeze there, and if I stayed in the shade, it would probably be quite cool.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>"..."<p>

My hopes and dreams of a comfortable afternoon were shattered.

I sighed in frustration, "There's no wind!"

The sun's heat was unrelenting.

Normally, a nice, cool breeze would have given me a chance to feel comfortable, but...

I had a feeling it was going to be a bad day.

Shade was the best I could hope for, it seemed. I sighed, and sat down in the deepest shade I could find.

As I watched the sun roast Kyoto, something occurred to me.

"Oh...right... My father's been here, hasn't he?"

They'd told me as much, but they hadn't told me why.

Had he been tending to the injured? Or perhaps educating the Shinsengumi on how to avoid illness?

"Hmmm..."

No, that didn't sound like him.

He'd visited only a few times, or so I'd been told. If he'd really been the Shinsengumi's doctor, then he would have visited far more often.

Which left me with the question...why?

...

It had already been made clear to me that the Shinsengumi had plenty of secrets that I wasn't meant to know. I had a feeling that whatever my father had been up to, it'd had something to do with those secrets.

"No...that can't be right...can it...?"

I shook my head again, trying my best to dispel the dark thoughts taking shape there.

"What 'can't be right'?"

"Ah!"

I spun around to find that Sanan had walked up behind me, utterly

undetected and unannounced.

"Oh! Sanan! Is it...all right for you to be walking around...?"

He almost appeared hurt by my question, "Please. I'm no bedridden invalid. There is nothing wrong with me."

But when he spoke, there was a hint of coldness to his words.

"...Although I suppose my left hand is something of an invalid."

"..."

I couldn't bear to look at the sad, twisted smile he gave me.

His arm hadn't healed, and it seemed certain now that it never would.

The rest of the captains seemed sure that he would never be able to use his arm as he'd done before.

He gave me an inquisitive glance, "And what are you doing? Are you allowed out of your room? You haven't been given the run of our headquarters, I'm sure."

I blushed involuntarily, "Yes, I know... I'm sorry."

They usually let me walk around as I pleased, so long as I didn't go into anyone's room, but I knew that, technically, I was still confined to my quarters. Whatever freedom I had was out of kindness, nothing more.

In other words, Sanan was right. If he decided to chastise me for being in the courtyard, I had no reasonable response.

"There were some things I wanted to think about." I told him. "I had hoped the courtyard would be cooler than my room..."

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I realized they sounded far more like childish excuses than any sort of real explanation.

Sanan smirked at me, "When you sneak about without permission, it makes it seem as if you have something to hide."

I struggled not to look away, "I'm sorry..."

My explanation had been poor, certainly, but he could have at least pretended to acknowledge it...

Still, I was beginning to grow accustomed to the subtle cruelty that seemed to accompany each word out of Sanan's mouth.

"All right... I'm going back to my room, then," I said as I turned to walk away.

Sanan's unpleasantness had started after he'd been injured during his trip to Osaka. He spent most of his time locked in his room now, and

he was quick to take out his frustration on other people.

I knew the loss of his arm had hurt him, probably more than I could understand, but... I wished that he could go back to being the warm, kind man he'd been when I'd met him.

"..."

I turned around to see him still standing there.

"Um..." I hesitated a moment, "It's really hot out today. You should try and stay out of the sun. And...please take care of yourself."

I gave him a nervous little laugh, and he responded with a chuckle of his own.

His smile didn't look forced.

"Thank you. Take care of yourself as well."

"Okay!"

Somewhere in there, the Sanan I'd first met was still there.

My spirits lifted, I ran back to my room.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>It was later that evening that the compound exploded with activity.<p>

I was walking down the hall when I heard footsteps, and turned to see Nagakura coming toward me.

"Um...Nagakura?"

I glanced at the stuff clutched in his hands, "What's that for?"

He glanced down almost absently at his hands, which held a candle and an exceptionally long needle.

"One of the Choshu guys we picked up isn't talkin'." He cleared his throat, "The commander's gonna talk to him personally, but he said he didn't have the right, uh, tools, and sent me out to get these."

"I don't understand."

I got that they'd captured someone, but what were the needle and candle for?

"Hah! Look, kid, ignorance is bliss, all right? Don't think about it too much."

He gave me another bark of laughter, and then headed past me down the hall. I still didn't know what he'd meant.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>As the sun began to set, the activity in the compound reached a fever pitch.<p>

"Heisuke!"

He shot past my door as I called out, then wheeled back around.

"What happened? All the men are running around..." I felt suddenly hopeful, "Did you get some information out of that Choshu man you captured?"

He nodded as a grin creased his excited features, "It looks like they're having a meeting right now. We're getting ready for a raid."

"Oh..."

Heisuke went on to explain that the Shinsengumi would be splitting into two groups and searching locations at opposite ends of the city.

Kondou would take ten men to the Ikeda Inn, and Hijikata would take twenty-four to the Shikoku Inn.

Heisuke's eyes were suddenly serious and a little irritated, "I heard that they're probably at Shikoku. Gotta say I'm kinda pissed the chief's sendin' me to the Ikeda..."

They'd send more men with Hijikata because they thought he'd probably be seeing action. Kondou and his men were just to make sure they covered all their bases.

"You mean there aren't even forty men ready to move...?"

I'd known that the heat and close quarters had made some of the men sick, but I hadn't known it was so many.

Heisuke sighed, clearly troubled by this, "We sent word to the Aizu and the Judiciary commissioner, but it's looking like they're just gonna sit on their hands..."

"It sounds like you've got your work cut out for you..."

Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could offer him apart from sympathy.

I had a feeling it was going to be a difficult night.

...

After all the men capable of fighting had left for their respective assignments, Sanan called for me.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>"I'm sure it was only out of courtesy, but the chief has asked me to protect the compound." He sighed sadly, "It's mostly empty, of course, but someone may try to attack us for that very reason. So I must ask you to stay where I can keep a close eye on you. I may need to give you orders, should the worst occur."<p>

"Okay."

I hesitated a moment, then spoke, "Does that mean... You'll protect me?"

I wasn't sure why, but he laughed at that.

"Well, I should hope I'll be of more use than the men who've been confined to their beds, at least."

Was I supposed to be...happy?

His smile was so sad. I wasn't sure what I should say... It seemed to hurt him the most when the rest of the men were out fighting, and all he was able to do was wait.

The silence between us stretched out until suddenly the door to our room opened without a sound.

"Colonel Sanan. We've confirmed that the Choshu are meeting at Ikeda."

"The Ikeda Inn?!"

"Oh dear..." sighed Sanan, "That's less than desirable. I suppose the Shinsengumi has never been good with games of chance."

His tone was light, but his face was serious, and with good reason.

They'd been certain Shikoku was the right location and had sent only half the men to Ikeda.

Sanan turned to the man who was clearly a ninja and said, "Yamazaki, can you do me a favor?"

Yamazaki nodded curtly.

"First, go tell Hijikata that the enemy is meeting at Ikeda. He should still be on his way to Shikoku." He glanced at me and then back to Yamazaki, "And I'm sorry to trouble you with it, but I need you to take this child with you as well."

This child...?

"W-Wait..."

Was he talking about me?!

Yamazaki seemed just as surprised.

The ninja turned to Sanan, his eyes still wide, "I...don't mean to be rude, Colonel but if all you need is a message delivered, I think I

can handle that by myself."

Yamazaki's cold eyes slid over to me for a moment as he spoke.

"There may be ronin out to intercept you," Sanan explained.

There was a chance Choshu had support, he continued. If Yamazaki encountered resistance, it would take longer for his message to reach Hijikata, perhaps too long. Assuming, of course, that it reached him at all.

Sanan finished with the soft smile I hadn't seen him use for weeks.

"Do you see what I'm trying to say...?"

Yamazaki nodded.

"If the worst should happen, I can hold off any Choshu ronin and give her the message."

"Oh..."

I gulped.

It sounded as if they were suggesting that if things went badly, Yamazaki would sacrifice himself.

Sanan nodded, "Yes. Of course, I doubt it will come to that." He glanced at me then back to Yamazaki, "We're short of men right now, which means there's more I need you to do. You'll need to notify the Aizu and Judiciary Commissioner as well."

That would have Yamazaki running all across Kyoto... I suppose it really drove home just how this the Shinsengumi was stretched.

Apart from Yamazaki and Sanan, the only other person able to carry messages was me.

The ninja turned to me, a stern look in his eyes, "You're Chizuru Yukimura, right? i've heard you know a little about how to protect yourself."

"Y-Yes, I do..."

He looked at me for a moment emotionless.

"Unfortunately, I can't guarantee your safety. If you can work with that, you're welcome to join me."

If I tried to run away while we were out, I had no doubt that he would kill me without hesitation.

He would see his mission as the priority, not my life.

Even so...

"I'll go!"

If I really could help, then I wanted to.

I'd lived with these men for almost half a year. They'd fed me, given me a roof over my head, and helped me look for my father.

"I can take care of myself. You don't need to worry about me."

Sanan gave me a small smile.

I knew he wanted to join the battle more than anyone, but we both knew that wasn't possible. The least I could do for him was carry out my mission.

Yamazaki turned to face Sanan, "Very well. I accept your request, Colonel."

He bowed, then turned to me. "Run with all your might," he whispered, and ran from the room.

I took after him, my legs working as hard as they could.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>Out into the street we ran.<p>

I discovered quickly that half a year indoors had done little for my physique, and I was clearly out of shape.

After only a few blocks, I found myself gasping for breath.

Yamazaki glanced at me then looked forward again, "No matter what happens, follow this street. Don't look back."

I had neither the time nor the breath to respond.

When we'd left the compound, I'd already decided that I would trust Yamazaki completely.

So I didn't look back.

As I stepped into the next intersection, I saw a flash of metal out of the corner of my eye "â€"

"Keep going!" shouted Yamazaki, "I'll catch up in a moment!"

"Right!"

I didn't look back. I kept running. I pretended i didn't hear the sounds of swords ringing against one another behind me, gritted my teeth, and ran.

My knees felt weak, and my legs shook, but I kept going. They'd have to collapse, or shake themselves to pieces, before I'd stop.

Even so, I felt so slow. I wanted to cry out, to scream at my body to go faster, _fasterâ€"_

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>"Ah?! "<p>

Light shone out of the darkness so suddenly that for a moment I was blinded.

My heart stopped. Was it Choshu soldiers? I froze.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I very nearly began to cry with relief as Hijikata stepped out from the shadows.

Instead, I simply collapsed as Harada reached out to grab me.

"Hey, you all right? If you left the headquarters without permission, Hijikata's gonna kill you."

I grabbed hold of Harada's hand and pulled my body to its feet.

What I wanted to tell him was that I'd had permission to leave, and explain to him that it was all right for me to be there, but I was breathing so hard I could barely speak.

Besides, I hadn't been sent to Hijikata to make excuses.

I took as deep of a breath as my shuddered lungs could manage, and spoke.

"Th-They're...they're meeting at Ikeda..."

Suddenly, Hijikata's expression changed.

"Then they are at Ikeda."

I nodded rapidly.

Saito placed a calming hand on my shoulder, "Are you sure?"

Hijikata gestured toward me.

"Sanan lost his arm, not his brain. The kid didn't run away. The colonel sent us this message."

Harada whistled.

"I'm pretty impressed you found us. I didn't really think you knew Kyoto that well, kid."

"Ya...Yamazaki..."

I'd finally got some of my breath back, and I did my best to tell them what had happened.

"What about the Aizu and the Judiciary Commissioner's men? Are they on their way to Ikeda?"

I just shook my head.

Hijikata thought for a moment, then spoke.

"Saito, Harada, you take our men to Ikeda. I need to go deal with something."

Harada and Saito nodded curtly, then turned to their business.

Saito turned back to me, "Kyoto will be dangerous for you alone. Stay with us, or go with Hijikata."

I still lacked the breath to respond properly, so I simply nodded.

We both knew they couldn't leave me here â€" I didn't know how to get to the compound â€" but who should I go with?

...

The prospect of being alone with him was rather frightening, but for reasons I still don't understand, I decided to go with Hijikata.

We were quiet for a while. I felt like I should say something, but I wasn't sure what.

"..."

Instead, I kept quiet. After a moment, he glanced down at me.

"Good job with that message," he said, a small smile playing at his features, "I think it might have given us the advantage we need."

...

I'd never thought Hijikata of all people would praise me for anything. My heart fluttered momentarily in my chest.

Still...what did he mean by an advantage? If the battle at the Ikeda Inn had already begun, it didn't seem like we had much of an advantage at all.

xxxxxxx

* * *

><p>We stepped out from the alley and onto the central avenue.<p>

"Um...Hijikata?"

I glanced at him.

"Why are we out here on the street?"

"What kind of man tries to hide all the time?"

"Uh...?"

I blinked, not sure what to make of that, whenâ€”

Yamazaki appeared beside us without making a sound.

"Yamazaki! You're safe!"

He didn't seem to have been hurt at all, thank goodness.

Yamazaki's eyes slid to me for a moment, then back to Hijikata.

"You're already aware of the situation at Ikeda, I assume?"

Hijikata nodded.

"Colonel Sanan ordered me to notify the Aizu," the ninja continued, "and the Judiciary Commissioner, but..."

Hijikata simply nodded again.

"Yeah. I'll have new orders for you in a few minutes. Stick close for now."

He lifted his chin a fraction of an inch, and something in his voice changed, almost imperceptibly.

"Your commander needs to go have a word with a bunch of useless bastards."

Deep in his cold eyes, I saw a spark of anger.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than they appeared: Line after line of government soldiers, marching toward us.

There were hundreds of them... Even marching abreast across the entire width of the street, they were several rows deep.

Now I understand why Hijikata had taken us out into the street; the government force would never have fit through the back alleys, and we would never have seen them.

There was something about their march, so seemly slow and unconcerned, that lit the fires of anger in my own eyes.

"But the rest of the men are still fighting at the inn..."

The Shinsengumi had only a few soldiers able to fight, but even so, they were risking their lives for the safety of Kyoto.

Didn't these government men have the same responsibility? Why weren't they rushing to help the Shinsengumi at the inn?

Perhaps my anger was more obvious than I realized, because Hijikata gave a snort of laughter.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they don't screw us."

With that, he stepped forward into the very middle of the street, directly in front of the advancing soldiers.

He did nothing more than move a few feet and turn to face them, but there was such authority in his movements that he could have easily been at the head of an army.

"The Shinsengumi are currently conducting an official investigation of the Ikeda Inn!" His eyes narrowed, "You will not interfere. You will not enter the Ikeda Inn."

Even I could see that the government men were going to protest Hijikata's proclamation when Yamazaki leaned over and whispered something to me.

"If we let these men walk into the inn, then they'll take credit for subduing this Choshu threat."

"What?! How could they..."

After all the Shinsengumi had done... It just didn't seem fair.

"But... But it's the men of the Shinsengumi who are risking their lives!"

Yamazaki simply looked away.

"Then you see now how little respect they have for the Shinsengumi."

If we allowed them into the inn, Yamazaki told me, then they would undoubtedly play up their own role. In fact, they would likely entirely omit the fact that the Shinsengumi had been first on the scene.

That was why the commander was making sure to keep them out.

At last I understood what Hijikata had meant earlier when he spoke of an advantage.

"B-But we must..." One of the government officials stammered.

"You really think you can fit all these men in there?" started Hijikata, "The best you'll be able to do is surround it." His brows furrowed, "...Unless you really want to send them in there to die. There's a fight going on, you know. If you value the lives of your men, I suggest you stay put."

The Official glared, "Rrrggh..."

Hijikata's tone as much as his words left no room for argument.

Until the battle ended, he stood his ground, and not a single man challenged him.

...

...And then, the sun came up.

The raid itself had lasted only two hours...

But for me, at least, it had felt far longer.

There had been twenty imperial nationalists at the Ikeda Inn. The Shinsengumi had killed seven ronin, and injured four more.

I learned later that with the help of the Aizu Domain and the Kyoto Judiciary Commissioner they had arrested twenty-three people.

The owner of the Ikeda had also been arrested, for trying to help the Choshu rebels escape.

The Shinsengumi had won an incredible victory, fighting against superior numbers in enemy territory, but they had paid dearly for it.

Okita had taken a blow to the chest, and had lost consciousness. Heisuke had been cut on the forehead, and the bleeding refused to stop.

Nagakura had injured his left hand.

One of the Shinsengumi's soldiers had lost his life at the Inn's rear entrance, and two others had been severely injured there as well.

It didn't seem likely that they would survive.

The Kyoto Military and Judiciary Commissioners "run by the Aizu and Kuwana Domains, respectively" had also fought Choshu ronin.

With their successful resolution of the Battle of Ikeda Inn, the Shinsengumi had at last made a name for themselves.

It looked as though the peace in Kyoto had been protected. Never could I have imagined what the ultimate result of their victory at the Ikeda Inn would be...

5. Chapter 1-4

sorry for the wait

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 1-4<p>

August 1864

After the fight at the inn, I was able to leave the compound much more often.

>I suppose after what I'd done, Hijikata thought I'd earned a little more trust. I didn't feel like I'd done anything that extraordinary, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.
On this particular day, I was out on patrol with Harada and the 10th Division.

>I glanced over at him, "Excuse me...Harada?" I hesitated a moment, "The Shinsengumi is out patrolling day and night, right? But...what exactly is it that you do?"
Most of the men in the Shinsengumi were intimidating, death-dealing titans, but Harada was a rare exception: warm and friendly.

>He gave me a kind smile, "Well, I guess we do just about everything. Obviously we arrest people who decide they want to test out their swords on the townsfolk, and we go after people who steal or don't pay for their food. Sometimes we break up fights..."
I blinked, "People who don't pay for their food..."

>He nodded, "And then there're those chumps who think they'll make a livin leaning on the merchants... We take care of all of that."
It wasn't really the answer I'd expected. Most of the stuff they did wasn't nearly as...dramatic as I'd thought.

>As I thought back, I remembered how excited they'd all been when they were preparing for the raid on the Ikeda Inn. Now I understood why.
What they'd done at the inn was a good deal more intense than their day-to-day work.

>A little further down the road a couple men in Shinsengumi blues were waving at us.
"Nagakura!"

>Our separate rounds had brought us to the same spot.
He smiled back, "Hey there, Chizuru! You find anything out about your dad?"

>I shook my head.
"No, nothing today..."

>He folded his arms and sighed before a grin creased his features, "Aw c'mon, cheer up! There's always tomorrow, right?"
"Yeah...yeah! You're right!"

>There was something contagious about his optimism.
Harada glanced at me then turned to Nagakura, "Well, Shinpachi? You find anything exciting?"

>Nagakura's smile faded, "No, nothing in particular, but... Well, all of the people on the street are acting..busy, you know?"
I hadn't noticed it before, but...he was right.

>They were acting strange, almost nervous.
"Yeah," I said, "I looks like they're getting ready to move."

>Harada nodded.
"You think maybe they're worried about getting caught in the middle of a war?"

>"...What?"
War? There wasn't a war, was there?

>"Oh, you didn't hear?" said Nagakura, "Well, those Choshu bastards are showing up around Kyoto again. That's why we've got extra watches these days."
Harada nodded and sighed, "Well, we did give 'em a bit of a bloody nose at Ikeda. I can't imagine they'll just stand around with some of their guys in the ground."

>Were the Choshu going to try something again?
The Shinsengumi were doing their best to keep order in Kyoto. In fact, they'd saved the city from the rebellious plans of the Choshu once before, with their victory at the Ikeda Inn.

>But even after all they'd done, the people of Kyoto looked at the Shinsengumi with fear and distrust, and plenty of them still sided with the Choshu.
The Shinsengumi were better regarded now than they had been before Ikeda, but even so...

>I asked Nagakura as much, but he only laughed.
"Not much we can do about that. Kyoto hates the Shogun."

>Harada nodded, "It doesn't matter anyway. We just do our job. The Choshu attack Kyoto, we drive 'em back. Simple."
They accepted their situation and never complained. I had a good deal of respect for Harada and Nagakura.

>Nagakura's grin faded, "If they don't back off soon, we're probably gonna be getting new orders all the way from the top."
For the Shinsengumi, the top meant the Aizu Domain.

>I glanced at both of them, "It's that serious, huh?"
Harada gave a bark of laughter and nodded.

>"Well, chances like this only come around every so often. Who knows when the next one'll be? You wanna join us?"
"What?!"

>Join?! Did he mean for me to join the Shinsengumi, and march to war

with them? I couldn't imagine joining them would be as simple as saying "Yes, please."
"Um..."
>Besides, it seemed rather inappropriate for me to ask to participate just so that I might satisfy my curiosity.
Still... I did want very much to be helpful in some way.
>Could I, perhaps, do something like what I'd done at the Ikeda Inn...?
Even if I could, though, I was terribly frightened of being anywhere near a battle.
>On the other hand, the men who'd been injured at Ikeda were still out of commission...
My mind was made up.
>I looked at Harada and nodded.
"I want to help."

...
>Several days later...
"Excuse me."
>Carefully, I lifted the serving platter with its tea for the captains, and made my way to the common room.
It had taken me longer than it should have to make the tea, so I was a little worried some of it had gotten cold.
>Nagakura smiled at me as I handed him a cup, "Thanks, Chizuru. Man... It's almost like you're our servant or something."<p>

I wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that, so I stayed silent as I handed out the tea.
>Inoue appeared troubled as he accepted his share of tea, "Thank you, Yukimura. I feel bad asking you to do this..."
I shook my head and smiled, "Oh, it's nothing. After all, you're always looking out for me."
>And besides, I felt much better when I had something to do; it kept me from feeling too much like a freeloader.
Okita took a sip of his tea, and a mild grimace flickered across his face.
>I frowned, "Um... Is it too bitter?"
He shook his head.
>"No, the taste is fine, but it could stand to be hotter. ...Then again, I suppose this sort of tea fits you."<p>

"Sorry..."
>There was a second or two of silence before the door flew open and Kondou strode in, a wide grin across his face.
The Shinsengumi has received an official request from the Aizu Domain. All available soldiers are to begin preparations to move out immediately!"
>The room broke out into cheers.
"It seems the Aizu have finally noticed all the hard work we've been doing, men."
>Kondou looked just as happy with the news as the rest of them.
Apparently, getting orders directly from the Aizu Domain was an occasion for some excitement.
>Hijikata, however, was the lone exception.
He glared at everyone, "We don't have time for this shit! Stop patting each other on the back and get moving! We need to go now!"
>He went on to explain that the soldiers of the Choshu had already spent some time preparing for their own attack.
He closed his eyes his left brow twitching, "So they only realize there might be a problem when the Choshu are ready to attack Kyoto? This is bullshit..." He mumbled the last part.
>Hijikata certainly seemed unhappy about the direction things had gone, and I could understand - at least to some extent - how he felt. If the Aizu had asked for help earlier, then the Shinsengumi would have had much more time to prepare.
Sanan smiled but he seemed distant and sad, "Okita and Toudou, you will remain here, at the compound. I doubt you find this a welcome order, but, well, neither do I."
>He rubbed his arm absently, and looked away.
He smiled again,

though it seemed forced, "Your injuries keep you from active duty, as does mine."

I didn't think there was any chance that hadn't made Heisuke and Okita feel at least a little guilty, but...
>Okita smirked and folded his arms, "Hey, I'm completely healed. I might not be 100 percent yet, but I'm not bleeding or anything."
>He acted almost as if he hadn't heard Sanan at all.

>Heisuke frowned, and touched the healing scar on his forehead, "You're making a big deal out of nothing! This's just a scratch! Kondou's being a wuss."
>Perhaps they were so used to Sanan feeling sorry for himself that they had simply ignored his comment.

>Perhaps it was time I learned to do the same...
>Harada nudged Heisuke in the arm, "You sure about that? Last night the pain had you crying like a baby before you took your medicine."
>Heisuke looked ready to kill as he turned on Harada, "You son of a bitch! Why you gotta rat me out?! Is there even a heart in there, you old bastard?"
>It seemed Heisuke's injury hadn't healed quite as much as he'd claimed.
>Harada shrugged, "Maybe, maybe not, but you know I'm telling the truth."
>The youngest captain frowned again, "...Yeah, well, you don't have to say it in front of a girl, you know?"
>He glanced sideways at me so I quickly said, "Oh... Don't worry about me. Everybody gets hurt."
>His bangs hid the scar rather well, but it still looked painful. There was a moment of silence, and then Nagakura spoke.
>"Oh yeah... Chizuru, you said you wanted to go with us if we got called in, right? You still up for that?"
>I blinked.

>"Uh..."
>Yes, I had said that, hadn't I...
>"Well...um..."
>I knew it couldn't be so simple as just asking to go.
>Kondou looked to me and grinned, "Ah, yes. Well, I see no reason why not. After all, it isn't often that one is given such an opportunity."
>"What?!"
>I hadn't expected Kondou to agree so easily.
>Heisuke let out a short laugh and grinned at me, "Whoa. Well, you sure got lucky, Chizuru. Make sure you do us proud, all right?"
>"Do us proud?!"
>Hijikata glanced at me and sighed.
>"We can't promise you won't get hurt, or worse. You should stay here."
>"Do you wish to place undue burden on the Shinsengumi? War is not something one does to ease one's boredom."
>Sanan's cold smile was anything but comforting.
>Saito glanced at me then turned to Sanan, "Colonel Sanan, can I take that to mean that so long as she is not a burden, she is free to accompany us?"

>"Um..."
>I blinked. Saito, standing up for me?
>Sanan seemed nearly as surprised as I was.
>"You can't be saying you're actually in favor of bringing her along..."
>Saito simply shrugged.
>"She was an asset at Ikeda." he sighed, "I only intended to point out that, judged by her actions, she has hardly proven a 'burden' thus far."

I could feel heat rising in my cheeks.
>Never in a million years would I have imagined that Saito might have a word of praise for me.
>Kondou gave a short laugh, "Excellent! I will take full responsibility for your inclusion. That is, of course, if you still wish to participate." "U-Um..."

>Sanan still didn't seem convinced. I looked around the room, until my eyes met Okita's.
He gave a small smile, "Do whatever you want to do, so long as you understand that we're going to a battle, not a party."

It looked like I wasn't about to get any help from Okita. In fact, he didn't seem to care one way or the other.

>"Well..."
Perhaps I'd be able to help them out, like I had during the Battle of Ikeda Inn...

>I nodded.
"Yes, I would like to participate."

...

>After that, everything was a blur.
As quickly as we could, we prepared for battle, and marched to the Fushimi magistrate's office.

>There were a number of the Kyoto Judiciary Commissioner's men gathered there as well, in preparation for battle with the Choshu.
Walking proudly in front of the men, Kondou approached the government official standing near the gate.

>"We, the Shinsengumi, are reporting as requested by Lord Katamori Matsudaira, the Lieutenant-General of the Aizu."
Katamori Matsudaira was the lord of the Aizu Domain, and also the Kyoto Military Commissioner, which made him a very important person. His name would have been immediately recognized.

>The man standing near the gate looked slightly taken aback at the mention of the Shinsengumi.
"You were told to report here...? But we received no such orders..."

>"What?"
No, that didn't make any sense...

>Perhaps sensing my confusion, Saito leaned over and whispered under his breath.
"If they haven't received notice of our orders, the lines of communication are likely in disarray. We can assume, therefore, that this conflict has become rather chaotic."

>"Chaotic..."
I did my best to keep my own voice at a whisper.

>"Do you mean the Choshu is overpowering the shogunate's forces?"
He glanced back at the Kuwana Official, "Not necessarily. However, I do suspect that the enemy is doing well."

The Judiciary Commissioner supposedly answered to the Military Commissioner, but the Military Commissioner's office was controlled by the Aizu Domain, and the Kuwana Domain controlled the Judiciary Commissioner's office.

>I didn't fully understand the relationships between the different domains, but so far as I knew the Aizu and Kuwana had never been on very good terms with one another.
In other words, the situation we had found ourselves in was less than desirable.

>Kondou was becoming annoyed, "Nonetheless, our assistance has been formally requested! If you could only speak to your supervi-"
"It wouldn't make a difference," said the Official, angrily, "Now get out of here. We have no use for Mibu's wolves!"

>"What?!"
How terrible... And after they'd asked for the Shinsengumi's help...

>I felt Harada's hand on my shoulder and turned to look up at him.
"Forget about them," he said, a hint of sadness in his tone, "This isn't anything to get worked up about. We get this sorta crap all the time."

>"But..."
I wasn't truly a member of the Shinsengumi, but even so...

>It was...galling.
Harada glanced back at the Official and his

Chief, "If we throw a fit here, then we might hurt Aizu's reputation. You get it?"

>"Oh..."
The Kuwana would only need to complain that the Shinsengumi hadn't shown them proper respect to make trouble for the Aizu.

>Saito calmly approached Kondou and the Official, "There's nothing we can do here, Chief. We should leave the magistrate alone and meet up with the Aizu Domain men on our own."
Kondou nodded in agreement, but his frown didn't fade.

>"Yes... I agree. That is our only choice. We must look for an officer of the Military Commissioner."
And with that, the Shinsengumi set off to find the soldiers of the Aizu Domain.

...

>Night had fallen by the time we arrived at Kujo Beach.
After we left the Fushimi Magistrate, we made for the Aizu manor. Once we arrived, we related our encounter at the magistrate's office and asked for new orders.

>The manor official we met with directed us to go to Kujo Beach, which we did. However
"What? The Shinsengumi is to join us?" complained an Aizu Soldier.

>"We've received no such order. I apologize, but could you go speak to the commander at the manor-"
Nagakura had, apparently, had enough.

>"What the Hell?! He was the one who told us to come here, Goddammit!" he snarled, "You wanna fuck us, fine, but you're gonna be disobeying a direct order from your superior, pal! You really wanna do that?!"
The man opened and closed his mouth a few times, then fell silent.

>Kondou did his best to keep his voice neutral, but there was no hiding the grin that had spread across most of his face.
"I would like to speak to your commanding officer, if I might. Do you think you might be able to take me to him?"

>At last, after a great deal of trouble, we were allowed to remain with the troops at Kujo Beach.
The chief and the captains left the rest of us to go speak to the Aizu commanders. They returned some time later, looking tired and drained.

>Inoue, who'd gone with them, also wore a bitter sort of half smile.
"Well," he said, glancing at me and the rest of the men, "it would seem that the men stationed here are reserves, and not the main force of their army." He sighed, "Their main force has been committed to the defense of Hamaguri Gate."

>I felt my eyes go wide.
"You mean they're treating the Shinsengumi like...reserves?"

>If the reserves weren't called into battle, then the Shinsengumi would never be given a chance to show their worth.
Nagakura let out a tired, frustrated sigh, "Then why the hell'd they send us a message acting like this was some sort of emergency?"

>"We can't predict what might happen," explained Saito, "We may be called upon to rush into battle. There is little else we can do, for now."
I glanced, sadly at all the other men of the Shinsengumi, "Then all we can do is wait "

>There was a chance we'd be called to action during the night, and so the men chose to stay awake, ready to move.
"Just let us know if you need to rest a bit, Chizuru," whispered Harada, "You're always welcome to sleep on my lap."

>"Oh, no, I'm fine."
Harada laughed as I shook my head.

>It wouldn't be fair if I was the only one who slept. The men had to

remain awake and ready to act all night.
At first, I was far too anxious, but by dawn I was sound asleep.
>All around me, however, the men had kept a constant vigil all through the night. Even as I drifted in and out of sleep, I'd seen them standing or sitting nearby, alert and watchful.<p>

â€|

>The sun had risen and I'd finally woken up when it happened.
"What?!" I shouted.
>The crack of a gunshot tore through the morning air, and in the distance I heard the shouting of men and the clang of metal. The fighting had begun.
The captains looked at one another and nodded.

>Saito reached down and carefully pulled me to my feet, "Time we left."
I stared at him for a moment, perhaps not yet fully awake, until I understood what he was saying.
>"Right!"
With a quick nod, I made ready to move, when-
>"Stop!" shouted one of Aizu Soldiers, "What do you think you're doing?! We were ordered to stay here!"<p>

During our lengthy march the day before, I'd never seen Hijikata mad. He'd left the yelling to Nagakura mostly, and stayed patient when it was time to speak with the army officials.

>But this timeâ€|
Perhaps he had finally had enough.
>"I'm sorry, I thought your job here was to protect the imperial estate, but I guess you'd rather just set around all day!" His voice grew steadily louder...angrier, "We're here because we're supposed to help if those Choshu assholes attack! Tell me, what are the Choshu doing, right now?!"
"B-But we haven't received any orders-" stammered the same Aizu Soldier.
>Hijikata was in no mood for excuses.
"If you've got any kind of pride in your job, then forget your goddamn orders and move!"

>"Rrrrggâ€|"
Without even waiting for a response, Hijikata spun around and stalked off, fuming.
>"Wh-Where are we goingâ€|?"
I didn't dare raise my voice above a whisper.
>Saito's eyes flicked down to me for a moment and his mouth thinned almost imperceptibly.
"To the enemy, which in this case means Hamaguri Gate."
>"Hamaguri Gateâ€|"
"The battle at the gate," he continued, "is likely to be an intense one. You had better prepare yourself."

>"All rightâ€|"
Hijikata's fury seemed to have roused the Aizu soldiers as well, and they followed the Shinsengumi to the Hamaguri Gate. Before long, we'd arrived.

â€|

>"What theâ€|?"
I'd expected a pitched battle, with hundreds of men locked in combat with one another, but what we found was something else entirely.
>The gate itself was pockmarked with scores of bullets, and everywhere dead and dying soldiers littered the ground.
The acrid stink of firearms hung in the air.
>What I didn't see, however, was the enemy. It seemed that we had arrived too late; the battle was already over.
After a moment of stunned silence, several of our men were dispatched to determine what had happened.
>Kondou sighed.
"What are the Choshu thinking? They've raided the imperial estateâ€|"

>Inoue looked just as troubled, "How can they claim to be an imperialist domain?"
Kondou simply nodded.

>The Choshu had defined themselves as among those who revered the emperor, and yet they would attack his home?
It didn't make sense to me either.

>I was pondering what motive they might have had when Saito returned.
"It appears the Choshu attacked Hamaguri in the early morning, but were repelled by the combined forces of the Aizu and Satsuma."

>The forces standing against them had been too much for the Choshu, and they'd been forced to retreat.
I saw the corner of Hijikata's mouth curl up into a grin.

>"So, Satsuma is helping Aizu now, are they? Times sure are changing."
Right?

>The Satsuma and Aizu Domains hadn't been on the best of terms.
In fact, the Satsuma were largely nationalistic, much like the Choshu. Unlike the Choshu, however, they'd gone to war with a foreign force at one point, and suffered a devastating loss.

>Father had told me that after that, Satsuma had begun to reconsider their nationalistic stance.
"Hijikata, there're still some of those Choshu bastards fighting over at Kuge Gate."

>Hijikata's expression changed as he considered Harada's words, but before he could open his mouth to speak, Yamazaki appeared.
"Commander, we believe the men who led this raid are headed to Mount Ten'nou."

>Although Kondou was nominally the head of the Shinsengumi, I'd learned from the men that everyone, including Kondou himself, generally deferred to Hijikata on most decisions.
This was no exception, and I could see that all eyes were on him.

>He was silent for a few moments, and then I saw his mouth curve in a small smile.
"Well, looks like we've got our work cut out for us, boys."

>A ripple of dry laughter ran through the men, and I could feel their excitement in the air.
"Sanosuke! Take your men to Kuge Gate to deal with those Choshu bastards."

>Harada nodded, "Sure thing, boss."
"Saito, Yamazaki, I want you to figure out what the situation is here. I want you to hold Hamaguri Gate."

>Saito nodded almost imperceptibly, "As you wish."
"Your job's a tough one, Chief." He turned to Kondou, "I want you to go talk to the Aizu bigwigs."

>Kondou tilted his head to the side quizzically.
Hijikata smiled, "Some of those bastards are headed for Ten'nou, but some of 'em are just gonna run around and cause trouble."

>A look of understanding came across the Chief's features.
"If we're gonna go after them," Hijikata continued, "then we'll need to leave Kyoto, and you're the only one who can get us those papers."

>Of course.
The Choshu were on the run now, but they could still do some damage as they fled. Pursuing them would take us outside of Kyoto, but the Shinsengumi's jurisdiction didn't extend that far.

>If we wanted to go after them, we'd need to get permission from the Military Commissioner, and that meant the Aizu.
"I see," sighed Kondou, "If the Chief of the Shinsengumi goes to speak with them, then the Military Commissioner's office will have to listen to what we have to say."

>After what we'd gone through the day before, I didn't imagine Kondou's task would be an easy one.
Still? If anyone other than Kondou went, not only would the Aizu be unlikely to grant their

request, there was a good chance the Shinsengumi representative wouldn't even be heard.

>Hijikata then turned to Inoue, "Gen, I want you to go with him. Somebody has to keep an eye on our Chief. Make sure he doesn't go crazy, all right?"
Inoue smiled, "Of course. I'll do my best, Commander."

>Another laugh ran through the soldiers, and Kondou's mouth twisted into a wry sort of grin.
Perhaps he chose not to deny it because he knew he might go a little crazy.

>Hijikata turned to the remainder of the men, "The rest of you are coming with me to Ten'nou. As for youâ€|"
He looked directly at me.

>I wasn't a warrior, and I didn't have any political skill of connections either. Hijikata didn't know what to do with me.
Suddenly, I felt very much like dead weight.

>"...You can't go with Kondou," he said quietly, "but other than that, it's up to you."
"Oh. All right."

>It hadn't occurred to me until that moment, but he was right. Kondou was going to meet with the leaders of the Aizu. If I went with him without wearing the Shinsengumi blues, then I'd be a difficult thing to explain.
"Umâ€|"

>Hijikata would be pursuing the leaders of the Choshu attack toward Ten'nou Mountain.
Saito would be staying at the Hamaguri Gate to protect it and to gather information.

>Harada and his men would be going to Kuge Gate to stop the attack on the imperial estate.
The question was...where would I go?

â€|

>There was no questing. I would go with Hijikata and chase after the ronin heading for Mount Ten'nou.
Even carrying both a Katana and a wakizashi, the Shinsengumi soldiers moved at a rapid pace.

>It was hard for me to keep up, and I was beginning to run short of breath when I saw...someone.
He was standing in front of us, but shadows obscured his face and clothes. Still, I could sense something strange about him. Hijikata seemed to sense it too, and he motions for the men to halt.

>The Shinsengumi stopped, save for one man, who was either too excited or too foolish to heed the commander.
"Gyaaah!"

>I saw the momentary flash of steel as the man cried out.
"Hey!" snarled Nagakura, "What the hell is this?!" He turned to the fallen man, "You okay?!"

>The man just lay there, unresponsive. I could see thick, red blood already beginning to pool around him.
Taken aback at first by the sudden attack, the men all turned now to glare at the stranger, who stared blankly back at us and said, "Ah, judging by those jackets, you must be the Shinsengumi. Boorish, as always."

>They were already on edge, but the man's words only made the men more agitated.
True, some people felt the jackets the Shinsengumi wore were a little old-fashioned, but I'd heard from the men that they had their reasons for doing so.

>I could tell that they wanted desperately to pay the strange man back for his taunts and for his attack on their brother, but they knew that now was not the time for revenge.
The blonde stranger gave us a mocking look, "First you got in my way at Ikeda, and now you're running around looking for more good deeds to appropriate as your own."

>The way he spoke made it sound as if he'd been there the night of the Battle of Ikeda Inn.
"So the peasant samurai haven't had their fill of defeat yet?" he sneered, "Oh, excuse meâ€| You aren't even real samurai, are you?"

>As he spoke, I felt the air begin to thicken with the rage of the Shinsengumi.
Hijikata was the one to respond, "You're the swordsman from Ikeda? Those are pretty big words from such a little man."

>His smile was anything but warm.
The stranger ignored him, "I'd heard you were talented, for peasants, but after this sorry display it looks like those rumors were just that."

>He looked down at the man he'd cut down and laughed.
"That man from the inn...Okita, was it?" he added snidely, "Far too weak to be considered any kind of real swordsman."

>Hijikata's teeth were now almost completely bared.
"Ahâ€|" I bit my lip to keep my anger in check.

>I knew that Okita wasn't weak at all, and I wanted to tell him so, butâ€| It was true that he had been injuredâ€|
"Insult Souji all you want, but how about you tell us why you killed this man first?!"

>I heard the soft his of Nagakura's sword sliding from its scabbard.
At his feet lay the man who'd been attacked, his face now an odd, pale color. There was no doubt that he was dead.

>"If I don't like what I hear," Nagakura continued, "then I'm gonna kill you right here!"
The man snorted.

>"To defend your warrior's pride? The shogun says 'Jump,' and you say 'How high?' Tell me, where's the pride in that?"
There was anger in his voice, too, but at what I didn't know.

>"Why are you pursuing men who've lost and fled the battlefield?"
There was a quiet rage in his tone, "If you even pretend to have pride of your own, then you must understand that they've gone to Mount Ten'nou to take their own lives!"

>"Whatâ€|?"
Was he telling the truth? Did the Choshu men really mean to commit honorable suicide?

>I looked over at Hijikata and the rest of his men, but not a one of them looked surprised.
The man in front of us was trying to stop the Shinsengumi in an attempt to protect the pride of the Choshu samurai. That was why he was mad.

>Butâ€|
I glanced at the fallen man and then turned on the blonde man.

>"Is...is it really all right to take a man's life for the sake of someone else's pride?"
It seemed to me that fighting for the sake of someone else's pride wasn't really right. How could you know their heart, or their thoughts? Pride is something that you have to defend yourself.

>"How can someone keep their pride if someone else has to fight for it?"
In a way, I could understand his intentions, but I couldn't help but question his actions.

>"Then are you saying I should simply allow the Shinsengumi to take what pride the Choshu have left so that they can earn a commendation for arresting them?"
He did not sound amused.

>"No, that's...not really what I meant, butâ€|"
Under that crimson glare, my voice trailed off, I felt like I hadn't really explained myself at allâ€|

>Hijikata had listened to our short conversation, and he seemed unimpressed.
"Pathetic. I thought you were trying to make some kind of point, stranger, but you're just whining like a child who can't get his way. This is war, you idiot!"

>"What?"
The man spoke through clenched teeth, and the knuckles of his sword hand had gone white.

>"They started a fight over something stupid, then didn't have the balls to see it through and ran away with their tails between their legs. Men like that don't deserve to die with honor!"
His voice

cracked like lightning, and before I realized it, I'd taken a step back.

>"They're traitors, and cowards besides. You really think a man like that deserves an honorable death? They'll die with their guts where they belong and their heads in the dirt."
"Then you mean to say they should have been prepared to die for their cause when they went to war?"

>"Any man who starts a fight he isn't willing to give his life for doesn't know what it means to be a warrior." Hijikata sighed, "Let's say they do have some scrap of pride left. Wouldn't dying in battle be better than dying on your own sword?"
I didn't fully understand what he meant, but I could tell that Hijikata's own concept of pride and honor was not something he could easily compromise.

>Still, no matter how long he and the stranger spoke, I also knew that they would never see eye to eye.
There was the hiss of metal as Hijikata drew his sword from its scabbard, and I saw Nagakura drop into a fighting stance.

>Hijikata turned to look at him, his eyes narrowed, and after muttering something angry under his breath Nagakura stepped back and put his blade back in its sheath.
"You don't look like a coward to me," said Hijikata, turning back to the stranger, "so I figure you're ready to finish what you started when you killed one of my men."

>"Big words from a small man," said the blonde, "Do you honestly believe you can defeat me?"
In an instant, their swords met, and the clang of metal on metal reverberated through the mid-afternoon air.

>They sprang apart, eyes fixed on one another, and I saw Hijikata's hands tighten on his sword.
The commander was a skilled swordsman-very skilled-but this man had defeated Okita.

>I saw Nagakura reach for his own sword. He was clearly about to leap into the fight as well, probably hoping to help Hijikata gain the upper hand.
"No, Nagakura!" I shouted, "You can't!"

>This fight wasn't why the Shinsengumi had come. Their mission was so follow the Choshu rebels to Mount Ten'nou.
There could be no doubt that the strange swordsman was an enemy, and a dangerous one-it might take our entire force to defeat him-but Hijikata would be furious if we abandoned our mission.

>Nagakura knew it too, and after a few moments spent grinding his teeth, he took his hand off his sword.
"He, Hijikata. I'm gonna take your guys for a bit if that's all right with you!"

>The commander's eyes never left the swordsman's face, but his mouth curled into an almost predatory grin.
Nagakura faced the rest of the men and said, "Listen up guys! We're gonna run straight for Mount Ten'nou, and we aren't gonna stop till we get there!"

>The soldiers roared their assent.
The blonde narrowed his red eyes, "Damn you!"

>"Pay attention," snapped Hijikata, "I'll put a sword through your back as easily as your front."
With Hijikata in striking distance, the swordsman didn't dare move as the soldiers of the Shinsengumi-myself among them-jogged past him, toward Mount Ten'nou.

>"We'll be waiting for you at Mount Ten'nou!"
It would have felt strange to leave without saying...something to him.

>"Please catch up to us soon!"
His eyes narrowed just a fraction, and he let out a laugh.

>"Who the hell do you think I am?"
His voice was calm, confident, and slightly arrogant.

>I nodded to him and jogged past, falling into step with Nagakura and the rest of the men. We ran straight for Mount Ten'nou and didn't

look back.<p>

â€|

>"It's almost nighttimeâ€|"
I was waiting at the base of Mount Ten'nou.

>Nagakura had led most of the men further up, in search of the Choshu rebels, but a few had been left at the bottom, in the unlikely event that any of the Choshu came this way. I'd stayed with them.
"...It'll be all right. They'll be back soon, I'm sure of it."

>How many times had we done that, I wondered. Every time I seemed down, Shimada was there to cheer me up.
"Do you really think so?"

>I couldn't get Hijikata out of my head. We'd left him behind, fighting an opponent we knew nothing about.
It was all too easy to imagine that the worst had happenedâ€|

>"I hope he's safeâ€|"
No sooner were the words out of my mouth than a shadow appeared in the dirt road in front of me.

>"Ah!"
The shadow stepped toward us and into the light-

>"Hijikata!"
He was all right!

>I felt tears spring to my eyes, and shoved them away with the back of my hand.
"Glad to see you're safe, Commander. Doesn't even look like you've been injured. Good work."

>Shimada was right: Hijikata was without a scratch, but even so his face was dark.
"I'd hoped we'd have a real fight, but we'd barely started when the Satsuma stuck their noses in."

>"What were the Satsuma doing there?" I asked.
"His name's Chikage Kazama. Seems he's part of the Satsuma," was his reply.

>"But if he's part of the Satsuma Domainâ€|"
Hadn't they helped the Aizu drive off the Choshu?

>Then why had Kazama tried to stop the Shinsengumi?
I frowned. Something wasn't right.

>"Does that mean he disobeyed orders? Kazama, I mean."
"Probably. The men who broke up our fight seemed like they didn't know what the hell he was up to either." Hijikata sighed, "For whatever reason, I don't think they could push him around."

>"He must be pretty important," said Shimada.<p>

From what Hijikata had said, Kazama was certainly a skilled, powerful warrior, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than that.

>When Hijikata spoke next, his voice was bitter.
"He's a lazy son of a bitch with enough money or influence to do whatever the hell he feels like. He doesn't give a shit about honor or pride."

>There wasn't anything Shimada or I could really say in response to that, and so we fell silent.
Before Hijikata could continue, we heard the sound of men approaching, and Nagakura appeared, the bulk of our detachment trailing behind him.

>I saw Nagakura stop for a split second when he noticed Hijikata, and then a grin tugged at the side of his face.
"Well, we went up to the top to have a look, but every last one of those bastards had already cut themselves wide open."

>"Ohâ€|"
My heart fell as he explained.

>I wasn't sad that they'd killed themselves, of that the Shinsengumi hadn't been able to arrest themâ€| Only that more lives had been lost.
"Honorable suicide, eh? Good for them."

>As Hijikata spoke, he flashed half a smile at Nagakura.
"Is...is that okay?"

>Only a few hours before, he'd said that they were criminals, and only deserved to be beheaded, but now he was applauding them for taking their own lives?
He shrugged.

>"Not for the Shinsengumi. We let them fulfill their mission, which means we failed ours"
"Umâ€|"

>"I wanted to arrest them, but they're dead now. What good would it do to ignore what they did? Friend or enemy, a man who dies with honor deserves at least some respect."
"Ohâ€| I suppose that makes some sense."

>It was obvious that I really only half-understood what he was trying to say, and his expression softened a little.
...And that was the end of our journey to Mount Ten'nou. Together once again, we returned to the imperial estate to meet up with the rest of the Shinsengumi.

>On the way back, Hijikata and the men began to discuss their next move. I looked like there was still plenty for the Shinsengumi to do in Kyoto.<p>

â€|

>The Choshu extremists' attempted attack on the imperial estate eventually came to be known as the Hamaguri Rebellion.
Although the Shinsengumi were called to action, their efforts were stymied, and they found little in the way of glory. Communication with their superiors had been poor at best, and they spent much of the battle waiting with the reserves.

>When the Shinsengumi did finally enter the battle, they found several strange opponents awaiting them:
Chikage Kazama, the man who had defeated Okita at Ikeda, claimed to be from the Satsuma Domain during his encounter with Hijikata.

>Kyuju Amagiri, the man who had shattered Heisukie's head-guard at Ikeda, also claimed membership in the Satsuma.
They had also met Kyo Shiranui, who'd fought alongside men from Choshuâ€|

>Whoever they were, it was clear they were not allies of the Shinsengumi. Indeed, it seemed they could easily become so of its greatest enemies.
If they were to meet in open battle, the casualties would be severe.

>By the time the battle was over, the commanders of the Choshu attack had been killed in the fighting or taken their own lives.
There were some soldiers, who escaped, setting Kyoto ablaze as they fled.

>By some terrible misfortune, the wind that day blew from the north and fanned the flames, reducing the southern end of the imperial estate to ash.
As a result of the Choshu attack, many imperial nationalists were executed.

>After everything had been sorted out, the Shinsengumi were at last given permission to patrol outside of Kyoto, from Osaka to Hyogo.
No sooner had they been given permission than they set to work, rounding up unruly ronin and defending the public good.

>With the Hamaguri Rebellion over, the Choshu were branded as traitors for attacking the estate. From then on they were acknowledged enemies of the court.<p>

6. Chapter 2-1

Sorry for the wait ^^;

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 2-1<p>

February 1865

After breakfast one day, I found myself on my way to the common room with a tray bearing tea.

>"Tea's ready."
I made my way around the room, pouring a cup of tea for each person, making sure not to spill any.

>It was a routine I'd begun to feel accustomed to.
"Oh, thank you, Yukimura."

>Inoue gave me a warm smile as I handed him his tea.
"There is nothing quite so delicious as hot tea on a cold day."

>"Thank you!"
I felt a flush of pride at his words, even though I knew quite well that serving tea was hardly anything impressive. Just the same, I felt as if I was helping out in a way, and that was a nice feeling.

!

>It had been a year since I'd first come to Kyoto in search of my father.
Living with the Shinsengumi wasn't easy, but they'd helped me look for him

>Even after a year of searching, however, I hadn't found anything. Sometimes I felt like it was hopeless; like I'd never find him, and that I should just give up.
But the men of the Shinsengumi never gave up. They were always there to cheer me on, and keep me going.

>In a way, I suppose I'd grown to love living with them.
And I'd even been able to repay them for some of their kindness, by helping treat the wounded at the Battle of Ikeda Inn and during the Hamaguri Rebellion.

>Little by little, I started to feel like I was accepted; as if perhaps I was beginning to fit in.
As strange as it might sound, I was beginning to feel as if I had found a place with the Shinsengumi.

!

>Then Hijikata spoke, and his words brought me back to the present.
"The Yagi have been good to us so far, but this place is getting crowded."

>Nagakura nodded, "True, it is getting a little small, especially with all the new guys coming in!"
"You're going to be getting even more soon, right?" I said.

>Heisuke was currently in Edo, recruiting more men for the Shinsengumi's ranks.
It was always good to have more soldiers, but they were beginning to run out of space at the compound. The rank and file soldiers were being packed into smaller and smaller rooms.

>Nagakura sighed heavily, "If we could move to a bigger place, that'd be great. The guys are starting to get a little grumpy about being packed together in those rooms every night."
I couldn't exactly offer to share it, but I was starting to feel guilty for having a room of my own.

>"Easy for us to say," said Okita, folding his arms, "but it's gonna be hard to find someone else who's willing to let us stay at their place. You have something else in mind?"
Hijikata's smile was almost predatory.

>"The Nishi Hongwanji temple."
"Ahahahaha! They aren't gonna like that very much." Okita laughed again. "You're thinking we'll just force our way in? Guess I wouldn't expect anything less for you, Hijikata."

>"Um!"
I didn't leave the compound much, except to go on patrol

with the men, so I still didn't know Kyoto very well, and I had no idea what sort of place this Nishi Hongwanji temple was.

>"It is pretty big," said Harada, "I'll give you that, but I really don't think monks are going to take to a bunch of soldiers living in their temple." He paused and then added, "Still, the location's great. We'll be able to get out into the city a lot quicker than from out here in Mibu."
At the time, the Shinsengumi's headquarters was in the Mibu area, which was on the outskirts of Kyoto.

>Harada was right in that the current location made it difficult for the Shinsengumi to reach some parts of Kyoto quickly, which reduced their effectiveness. Stillâ€|
"Will they really not want us there?" I asked.

>Saito only shrugged.
"The Nishi Hongwanji temple has been cooperating with the Choshu. Some of their ronin have stayed there."

>"Ohâ€|"
If they supported the Choshu, then that would make them Shinsengumi their enemy. Little wonder, then, that they would hardly welcome us with open arms.

That meant a whole other level of difficulty. Asking for a place to stay was hard enough, but asking that from an enemyâ€|?

>I fell silent, and Saito continued as if I'd never spoken.
"No doubt they will be less than receptive to our overtures. On the other hand, if we should move into the Nishi Hongwanji temple, the Choshu will have one less place to hide their agents."

>"Oh!"
Of course!

>Not only was the location desirable, but taking the temple would make the enemy's movement more difficult. Whatever problems we had acquiring the temple would likely be worth it.
Sanan however didn't agree. His eyes narrowed in anger at all of us.

>"You don't think it somewhat...uncouth to use force against men of the cloth?"
There was no hiding his distaste for the idea.

>Hijikata's voice was level, but firm as steel.
"The Choshu have used the temple to hide their men, and they couldn't have done that without the help of the monks."

>"I agree that the Choshu must be dealt with but this seemsâ€|"
His voice trailed off. Although he was still clearly upset, there was little more he could say or do.

>Kondou cut in at this point, "I agree with Toshi, but I have to concede that Sanan has a point."
He nodded solemnly, apparently deep in thought.

>"Impressive as always, Chief Kondou. Only a man with a truly open mind can be so considerate of both his enemies and his allies."
"Oh?" Kondou blushed, "Well it's very kind of you to say so, but I fear my behavior is simply imprudent, not open-minded."

>He coughed at an attempt at nonchalance as Hijikata and Okita scowled in silence at the exchange.
The man who had just spoke was Kashitaro Itou, the new deputy commander. He had joined the Shinsengumi only recently.

>Kondou had left Heisuke in Edo and returned early with Itou and some of his men who had come to join the Shinsengumi.
He was reputedly a master of the Hokushin Itto sword style, and ran a school of his own.

>When Itou was introduced to the captains, none of them seemed particularly pleased with his addition to their ranks. No sooner had Itou and Kondou left the room than they began to talk amongst themselves.
"I've heard Itou is an imperial nationalist. Why would someone such as him join the Shinsengumi?" wondered Saito aloud.

>"He's like the Choshu, then?" said Harada. "Huh. You really think someone like that can get along with us?"
Hijikata grunted and pursed his lips for a moment.

>"Kondou's a national loyalist. They might not agree on the Shogun and the emperor, but they're both nationalists, through and through.
They might disagree about who should run the country, but neither of them wanted a foreign nation exerting its control over their country.

>"Besides, Kondou's a loyalist without a doubt, but he has a few imperialist tendencies of his own."
Perhaps the different factions weren't quite so staunchly divided as they might appear.

>Would Kondou and the Shinsengumi work for a future where the shogunate controlled the country, but the emperor was still treated with respect?
That seemed like a solution that could make everyone happy.

>If that was the case...then Kondou's version of national loyalty was a wonderful thing.
"I figure the only one of us who'd be very happy about Itou showing up would be Sanan, right?" said Nagakura.

>"True," said Harada, "They do both practice Itto, right?"
"He knows Itou too, doesn't he? And Sanan is a bit of a loyalistâ€|"

>I wouldn't have guessed that Sanan and Itou had so much in common.
His expression didn't suggest that he was particularly happy, though.

>"Yes, I have met Itou. He is well-educated, and a skilled orator. We have such a gifted deputy commander, I suppose that the Shinsengumi has little need for a colonel."<p>

Sanan's words hung in the air, heavy and awkward.

>I didn't understand the ranks of the Shinsengumi, but as far as I could tell, a deputy commander outranked a colonel.
"With Itou here, there is very little left for me to do."

>I hadn't even thought of it that wayâ€| Sanan felt that Itou was a threat to his own position.
An awkward silence fell across the room.

>Okita was the first to speak, "So? I don't like him."
"Yeah," agreed Harada a look of disgust in his eyes, "I know what you mean. There's something about the way he looks at youâ€|"

>Nagakura also nodded in agreement, "Exactly! I dunno how to put it...like he's sort of...uppity, you know? Like he's looking down on you or somethinâ€|"
There was a good deal of nodding and agreeing among the three of them for a few moments while I sat and thought.

>Truth be told, I didn't feel particularly comfortable around Deputy Commander Itou either. It wasn't that he was a bad person, per se, only that he wasâ€| How to say itâ€| Off-putting?
Itou's thin smile had spread across his face when Sanan voiced his objection to Hijikata's plan, and now he turned and spoke.

>"You always think of all the possibilities, Sanan. I'm impressed, but I fear you may be over-thinking this. It could be a problem, yes, butâ€|"
His tone was deferential, but it didn't quite match his words.

>"...Don't you think a slightly greater problem would be that your left arm is utterly useless?"
Whatever warmth had remained in the room was abruptly gone.

>"Of course, you needn't be useless, even if you can no longer serve as a soldier," he smiled, "I'm sure that your wit and foresight will continue to be a great asset to the Shinsengumi and myself."
It was as if Itou had taken a knife and driven it into Sanan's heart. I

saw his shoulders sag, almost as though he had been punched in the stomach, and all around the room, jaws were set and knuckles turned white.

>"Perhaps I didn't hear you right, Itou."
Hijikata's voice was cold and sharp, like the sound of a blade sliding across a whetstone.

>"Sanan's smart, like you said. But more than that, he's a swordsman of the Shinsengumi. He is not useless, and he is not replaceable!"
Hijikata's last words erupted from his mouth in a snarl, and there was no mistaking their meaning.

>"But my arm isâ€|"
Sanan couldn't even seem to bring himself to finish.

>No matter how much they might need a swordsman of his skill, Sanan could no longer wield a blade.
They both knew his arm would never heal, and Hijikata's desperate defense of his friend had likely only made Sanan feel worse.

>"Oh dear. That was terribly rude of me. Truly, there could be no better news than hearing that your arm has healed."
Itou's smile fooled no one, and Sanan fell silent.

>"...Goddammit."
He only muttered it under his breath, but I was close enough to hear. Too late, Hijikata had realized his mistake.

This was the first time I'd seen Hijikata so worked up. he might have been harsh, but he almost always projected an air of control. Perhaps Sanan's injury worried him enough to allow the mask to slip.

>"Ah...um...Itou."
Kondou was clearly choosing his words carefully, in a very nearly desperate attempt to change the subject.

>"If...if you would care to, perhaps you might come and have a look at our training regimen?"
Itou's eyes narrowed and his mouth curled in a small smile.

>"My...how thoughtful of you. Yes, of course, I would love to have a look! Ah, the training room! Air heavy with the sweat of men straining to better themselvesâ€| Truly a delight!"
"The sweat of menâ€|? Yes, I suppose you do have a point. The training room has grown rather mustyâ€|"

Itou could be a very peculiar personâ€|

>The two men left the room, chatting together as if nothing was wrong, and all eyes turned toward Sanan.
"Sananâ€| Don't listen to that asshole, okay?"

Sanan said nothing in response to Nagakura's words.

>"Umâ€|"
He stood up silently and left the room.

>Harada gave a heavy sigh, "Man, I feel bad for himâ€| Even the men are avoiding him these days."
"What?!"

>It was the first I'd heard of such a thing, but then again, I didn't normally see anyone but the captains.
"I had no ideaâ€|"

>Nagakura shrugged, "Well, he's kinda been a jerk lately. I imagine that's why."
It wasn't hard for me to see why they would feel that wayâ€| Sanan had gotten even worse in the last several weeks.

>"He wasn't always like that, you know," said Harada, "Back in the day, he was always acting like he was looking out for everybody."
Nagakura nodded, "Yeah. He was real nice, at least on the surface. Nothing left of that nowâ€|"

"Do you really mean thatâ€|?"

>The way they spoke, it sounded as if any kindness Sanan had shown was always a facade.
Okita scowled at nothing in particular, "What the hell does Kondou see in that Itou guy?"
Okita and Hijikata had largely ignored Nagakura and Harada, but their faces were dark and stormy. It wasn't difficult to guess why.
Hijikata narrowed his eyes, "How the hell would I know? Probably just pull the wool over Kondou's eyes with some well-spoken bullshit."
Okita gave him an annoyed look, "Then why don't you go get rid of him, Hijikata? Tell him the Shinsengumi doesn't need him."<p>

Hijikata let out a frustrated sigh, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

>"No way Kondou'll go for that. He adores Itou. Besides, when he joined he brought a bunch of men with him. You think they won't make a stink if we kick him out?"
Hijikata was right. He didn't like it any more than Okita did, but they were in a tight spot.
"Well damn! Aren't you supposed to be the Demon? The commander from Hell? You're supposed to make the impossible happen!" snapped Okita angrily.
Hijikata seemed unfazed as he said, "Fine Souji, how about we make you commander. Then you can kick Itou and his guys out, right?"
"Ha! Hell no! That's way too much trouble." chuckled Okita.
He gave a grin as he laughed, but when he finished, he sighed and his face fell.

It looked like everyone was unhappy with Itou, but none of them knew quite what to do about him.

>"Do you dislike Itou too, Saito?"
I'd noticed earlier that he'd kept quiet while the others commiserated, and I was curious what he thought.

>He looked at me for a moment, then spoke.
"As an organization grows, it will expand to include people who have differing ideas and points of view."

>Then...was he supporting Itou's appointment to Deputy Commander?
I was about to ask when he continued speaking.

>"However, if one attempts to force this sort of diversity, then the organization will begin to rot from within."<p>

His words hung in the air, a dark omen for the future of the Shinsengumi.

>It was considerate of Itou to join, but his presence seemed to be a recipe for dissension, if not outright disaster.<p>

â€|

The setting sun glowed through the windows with a warm, rich red, and we decided to move outside, in the hopes that it might raise our spiritsâ€|

>"...It's coldâ€|"
Despite the sun, it seemed that spring was still far away.

I wasn't too fond of Itou, but it was Sanan and his condition that truly worried me.

>"I really wish his arm would just healâ€|"
That arm, or perhaps more accurately the lack of it, had been the source of his change in personality.

>"Stillâ€|"
As nice as it would be for Sanan's arm to simply start

working again, that seemed like the stuff of a child's fable, not real life.

>That was when I rememberedâ€|<p>

Flashback

Okita: If push comes to shove, he'll have to take it. I don't think Sanan's just going to give up.

Nagakura: Don't jinx him, Souji. It's gonna look bad if officers start joining the corps.

Flashback End

The Shinsengumi had some sort of...something.

>I didn't know what it did, exactly, or even what sort of thing it was, but from the way they all talked about it, there was some manner of very unpleasant side effects.
"No, wait, I do remember somethingâ€|"

>Yesâ€| from what I had heard, it seemed that it has the capacity to heal wounds, and had something to do with the "Corps".
"...And it's also something I'm not supposed to know about."

>If they learned how much I'd picked up, or what I'd put together on my own, I had no doubt that I would be in serious trouble.
It was possible that they would even kill me.

>Stillâ€| If I could figure any of it out, perhaps I could do something to help.
"I am the daughter of a well-educated doctor, after all!"

>I liked to think that I had a little more knowledge of medicine than the average person.
The question remained, then, what should I do?

>Perhaps it would be best to just return to my room. I didn't want to get in trouble for wandering around and I didn't want to find myself in anyone's way.
"I'll just stay hereâ€|"

>It was rather dull, certainly, but better a dull evening than the alternative.<p>

â€|

>Just as the sun dipped below the horizon, the compound exploded with activity.
"Has something happenedâ€|?" I wondered aloud.

>I waited for a few moments for the activity to settle down, but it did no such thing.<p>

Something was wrong; I could feel it.

>I struggled against it for as long as I could, but eventually my curiosity got the better of me.
"There must be someone in the common roomâ€| I can ask them."

â€|

>"...To think that Sanan would have done this to himselfâ€|"
"Didn't I tell you not to let him out of your sight?! Was some part of that difficult to understand?"

>Hijikata's voice echoed out from the common room, quietly furious.
"Umâ€|"

>I tried to get their attention, but instinct had driven me to the very corner of the room, and they neither saw nor heard.
Nagakura gave a heavy sigh, "I did see him leave his room, butâ€| C'mon, how was I supposed to know he was going to do this?!" He narrowed his eyes, "He was in charge of the stuff, so he could've got it easy enough, sure, but he didn't look like he was carrying anythingâ€|"

>Nagakura was angry, certainly, but it wasn't all directed outward.
"I guess we wouldn't have known if he'd taken any, huhâ€|" Harada sighed, "I mean, I suppose there is a chance that the treatment would heal his arm, butâ€| It didn't work, did it? Everybody who took it went crazy."
>At last I began to understand.
Sanan had taken some of whatever treatment it was the Shinsengumi were so desperate to keep secret.

>"I believe Colonel Sanan had been working on improving it." All eyes turned to Saito, "He hoped to repair his arm before it had deteriorated too far. Perhaps he felt he was finished, or at least close enough."
He gave a small shrug.
>"Whatever the case, when he realized that he had failed, he ignored Souji's counsel and attempted suicide."
"Suicide?!"
>The words were past my lips before I'd even thought them.
As one, all eyes in the room turned toward me.
>Hijikata's flared with anger.
"Just what the hell are you doing here?"
>It was an accusation, not a question.
"U-Uh...umâ€|"
>The longer his cold gaze kept me pinned, the tighter my throat became, until I could barely breath let alone speak.
The strange combination of anxiety, suspicion, and animosity that I felt, I had felt before: on the night I'd first come to the headquarters of the Shinsengumi.
>Now, as then, I understood the meaning of that gazeâ€|
They were deciding whether or not to kill me.
>"Toshi, I think it's time you told her what's going on. She's Kodo's daughter, after all. She has a right to know."
I felt my eyes go wide at Kondou's mention of my father's name.
>Hijikata's gaze slid to Kondou, and he looked as if he'd eaten something unpleasant.
After a moment, however, he gave a long, exasperated sigh and turned back to me.
>"The Shinsengumi doesn't need you."
"Wh-Wha-?"
>"There's a chance you'll help us find Kodo, but even without your help we'll find him eventually. A minor setback, at worst."
Although it wasn't their primary duty, the Shinsengumi had the Watch, for when a manhunt was necessary. Someone who knew the target, such as myself, would make their job easier, butâ€|that was all.
>I was no more than a means to an end, and one of questionable value, at that.
He was right. They didn't need me.
>"You do anything weird, we'll kill you. I'm about to tell you what's going on here, but keep in mind that your life is in our hands."<p>

I swallowed.

>"Then...you aren't going to kill me?"
Hijikata narrowed his eyes.

>"We aren't going to kill you yet, but don't think that means your in the clear."
"Ohâ€|"
>It was a sort of acceptanceâ€|<p>

I was glad, I suppose, that I wasn't going to be killed, but I was still far from happy.

>I'd been with the Shinsengumi for nearly a year, and my position with them hadn't changed. It shouldn't have surprised me, but for some reason that truth cut deep.
"We never told you, but Kodo was here because he was developing a...treatment," said Kondou.
>"You meanâ€|"
I chose my words carefully.

>"The one that Sanan took?"
When Kondou nodded, it was as if there was a great weight resting on him.
>"It was first brought to us by one of the Shogun's men."
He explained that the concoction was said to have come originally from the west. Apparently, the shogunate had ties to countries across the ocean.
>"It was a foreign drug of sorts, that would tremendously augment a man's strength and ability to heal."
Moreover, Saito continued, it had the capability to increase a man's strength ten-fold, though the increased strength would make him slower. It also granted incredible healing powers, but piercing the heart or brain would still kill.

>"...But all of this came at a cost: the mind of any man who drank the concoction."<p>

It made sense, now that I thought about itâ€¦ That must have been what they meant by "bloodlust."

>"It was Kodo who experimented on the warriors of the Shinsengumi in an attempt to improve the drug. By diluting it, he was able to reduce the madness it brought to a more manageable level."
"My father was experimenting on peopleâ€¦?"
>"I'd suspected that my father had been involved in whatever the Shinsengumi had been hiding from me, but to discover that he had been experimenting on peopleâ€¦ Making them go madâ€¦
It was almost too much to bear.
>"Then that night in the alleyâ€¦?"
Harada nodded.
>"We keep the guys who've taken it in the Maekawa house. So long as they don't get any blood, they stay pretty calm."
If they were powerful, but lacked any skill or technique, then it was a simple thing for the captains to deal with those who got out of line.

>"The shogun's man told us we were supposed to keep all this under wraps."
In the Yagi house, we lived side by side with the Yagi family, which meant the rank-and-file soldiers weren't allowed to live there as well.
>The Maekawa family, by contrast, had fled their house as soon as the Shinsengumi had arrived, making it the perfect place to conceal the soldiers who'd gone mad.
"All right, we've told her enough. We need to think about Sanan."
>Hijikata's words made it clear that my education was at an end.
"He managed to refine it after Kodo left, so there's a chance he won't lose it."
>Nagakura seemed troubled, "Well, yeah, butâ€¦ I mean, look at him. He's practically deadâ€¦"
That's rightâ€¦ Hadn't Sanan tried to kill himself?
>Hijikata spoke through clenched teeth, "Well, if that crap actually does what it's supposed to, then that cut isn't going to kill him."
His voice was low; almost a growl.
>Even from across the room, I felt like I could hear his teeth grinding.
"Kondou. Can you keep an eye on him? Tonight's gonna tell if he lives or dies. ...Or goes crazy."
>Kondou nodded, "Very well. Souji is with him, right?"
He nodded toward Hijikata as he stood, and made his way to Sanan's room.

>"Don't let anyone near Sana's room. Especially Itou's men."
Itou and his men weren't terribly fond of the shogun, so it stood to reason that Hijikata wouldn't want them finding out about the shogun's secret experiments.
>Even apart from that, however, it was clear that Hijikata and the other captains trusted Itou about as far as they could throw

him.
"Shinpachi, go check on the Maekawa house."

>"Got it."
As he passed, Nagakura's eyes met mine for an instant, and I saw in them the same hostility I'd felt the night I'd arrived.

>"Saito, I want you in the inner courtyard. If Itou and his guys show up, keep them occupied."
Before waiting for Saito's response Hijikata turned to Harada, "Sanosuke, go keep an eye on the rest of the men."

>Saito and Harada nodded. At last, he turned to look at me.
"You. Go with one of the captains. I don't care who."

>"All rightâ€¦!"
In other words, he wanted to make sure I was supervised. Reasonable, I suppose, given the situation, but...who did I want to go with?

>Harada glanced at me as he neared the door, "Stay out of the Maekawa house, Chizuru. They get kinda rowdy at night."
Nagakura was on his way to the Maekawa house, where the men who'd taken the shogun's concoction were keptâ€¦!

It didn't really sound like somewhere I wanted to go.

>"Umâ€¦!"
That left the inner courtyard, with Saito, or the outside, with Harada. Hijikata hadn't said differently, so I assumed he would remain in the common room.

>After a moment's thought, I'd made up my mind.
Saito and Harada had already left.

The common room grew more and more uncomfortable the longer I sat-much more so than I'd anticipated.

>Not that I bore him any particular ill will; more that I simply didn't know what to do.<p>

His face was stern as always, but the thin lines across his forehead and about his eyes betrayed a greater unrest.

>"You."
In the awkward silence of the room, his voice was like a gunshot.

>I jumped.
"...You never really knew Sanan before he...uh, before he got like this. He's a smart man, and he's talented."

>"Well...I did notice he was very, um, sharp."
Hijikata gave me a short bark of laughter.

>"He was like a brother to me, even before we were part of the Shinsengumi."
Hijikata had never spoken to me about himself-or indeed about anything-at length. I didn't know why he'd chosen this moment to chance that policy, but I was happy he had.

>Perhaps, I thought, he didn't see me as such an outsider after all.
"The only reason I didn't throw that crap away was because I thought he might be able to use it to heal his arm. We knew it was dangerous, but we thought that maybe we could...improve it somehow. We need Sanan. We can't lose him."

Hijikata looked tired and drawn-moreso than I'd ever seen him before. His face was tight with strain, and he moved with the labored speed of a man who has pushed himself beyond his limits.

>Always before, as commander, he had been calm and level-headed. Never before had he looked so utterly spent.
"...It'll be okay."

>I struggled for some words to reassure him, and regretted the ones I'd chosen as soon as I said them.
How could I stay quiet, when he was in so much pain?

>"I'm...I'm sure Sanan will be all right."
The lines in his face softened, but only slightly.

>"He's got a strong spirit. I just hope it's strong enough."<p>

â€|

>At long last morning came.
One by one, the captains returned to the common room, tired and bleary-eyed from their long night.

>It was Inoue's entrance that broke the silence.
"He seems to have made it through the hardest part."

>The room breathed a silent sigh of relief.
"He's still asleep.

Looks pretty peacefulâ€|"

>Nagakura only relaxed a little before saying, "So has Sanan gone crazy?"
Inoue simply shook his head.

>"We won't know for sure until he wakes up, but he looks just like he always has."
That was when the door slid open.

>"Good morning everyone."
The tension that had relaxed at Inoue's entrance pulled tight as a drum at the sound of Itou's voice.

>At least, I thought, they don't do this when I just walk into a room.
Then I realized I was comparing myself to Itou, and wondered why on Earth I would do something like that.

>"My myâ€| You all look rather glum. Something to do with last night's excitement, I presume?"
Itou's position wasn't just the result of politics, then. There would be no simply ignoring the incident, it appeared.

>"Uhâ€| No, umâ€|"
Desperately, Kondou's eyes flew around the room, looking for someone who might give him a story.

>Nagakura folded his arms and turned to his close friend, "Sano! Make something up!"
"What?! Me?! Uh, well...you see, yesterday-"

>"You're a miserable actor. Stay out of this."
Okita's smile was bitter and thin.

>They sat back down.
"How about you leave the explanation to someone who can string two words together, hm?"

>Okita looked at Saito expectantly, and the other man nodded once.
"As you suspect, Deputy Commander Itou, there was an incident yesterday here at our headquarters."

>Furthermore, he continued, the situation was grim. Saito then proceeded to outline as much of the truth as he could, his eyes never wavering from Itou's face.
"We did not wish to trouble you with such matters just yet, Deputy Commander."

>By way of apology, he made a short bow.
"If you wish, I would be happy to provide you with a more detailed report this afternoon."

>"Oh myâ€|"
Itou's eyes narrowed and he looked slowly around the hall, a mischievous smile playing about his lips.

>"Very well. I comprehend your situation. I shall look forward to receiving the details this evening."
With another strange smile, Itou stood, nodded slightly, and left the room.

>"Feels like he let it slide this timeâ€|" Okita said, "Maybe he just liked how Saito handled it."
"Whatâ€|?"

>Yes, Saito had been respectful and - at least on the surface - forthcoming, both of which had likely pleased Itou, butâ€|
What had he meant about letting it "slide"?

>"We shouldn't have let him see all of us together."
I looked at Hijikata, confused.

>"The only man missing was Sanan. It won't take Itou long to realize something's happened to him."
"Ohâ€|"

>Then Itou had likely guessed at what had taken place, but decided not to press the issue. I was beginning to see what Kondou saw in himâ€| There was certainly no doubt that he was clever and observant.
"Ah!"

>I had looked up just in time to see Sanan shuffle through the door.

His face was pale, but apart from that he looked much like he always had.
"Sanan! ...Are you sure you should be up and about?" questioned Inoue.

>Sanan's only response was a small, sad smile.
"I'm only a little tired. A side effect of my new condition, I suppose."

>His smile faded.
"Those who've taken the draught often find that working during the daylight hours is especially taxing."

>In other words, it was working.
Sanan was already transformed.

>"I am no longer human."
He smiled.

>"Who cares what you are-you're alive! That's good enough for me!"
I could see the beginnings of tears well up in Kondou's eyes, but the rest of the men were more reserved.

>They were happy to see their friend alive, but what had his resurrection cost him?
Okita folded his arms his eyes flicked to Sanan's arm, "So...your arm's better, I'm guessing?"

>"I haven't fully recovered yet, so I would withhold any final judgement, butâ€¦"
He lifted his left arm, the arm that the day before had hung limp at his side, and flexed his hand.

>"...It seems to have been healed. At the very least, it is no longer a hindrance."
Thank goodness.

>If he had gone through all of that, just to find his arm still lame and uselessâ€¦
Harada seemed to finally find his voice, "You can't go out in the sun though, right? Will you still be able to fight with us?"

>If daylight drained one's energy, then living a normal life would be difficult enough, never mind fighting alongside the Shinsengumi.
"Best you simply say I died."

>Sanan's voice was calm, almost careless.
"From now on, I will serve in the Corps, to remind them, and us, that success is possible."

>Nagakura clearly disliked this plan, "What? Have you lost your mind?! Do you know what you're saying?!"
"Of course I do. Do you, Nagakura? The shogun had ordered us to keep this thing a secret."

>Nagakura fell silent.
"If I, ah, die, the shogun's secret remains so."

>Leaving no room for argument, he continued.
"Besides, if the side effects can be managed, or even removed, then what reason do we have not to use it.?"

>To a man, they were against his idea, though none of them said anything. Who would want to consign a friend to a life of secrecy, lived in the shadows?
"We were given this task by the shogun himselfâ€¦" muttered Kondou.

>Sanan's suggestion might not have been pleasant, but it was logical. The drug was dangerous, yes, but if it could be refined; the side effects removedâ€¦
It would be a powerful tool.

>A powerful weapon.
Kondou closed his eyes, "...I suppose this is our only choice."

>And with his word, it was decided.
"Well," said Okita, "this is what you asked for, Sanan. Make sure you don't screw it up."

>It wasn't exactly a vote of confidence, but Sanan simply responded with a smile.
"This means moving to a new location isn't something we can put off any longer," said Hijikata. "If we're going to hide Sanan from Itou and his men, then we need more space. This place won't cut it."

>Saito nodded.
"If we intended to begin research again, then a move is even more urgent."

>Sanan's fate decided, they turned to a discussion of where they might make their new headquarters.<p>

Whatever my status was, it did not extend to being included in that discussion.

>Living with the Shinsengumi for the past year had been quite an experience. Lately, I'd felt that perhaps it wasn't so bad, and my life had become almost...fun.
But the truth I couldn't escape was that I was only valuable to them because of my connection to my father; a truth they had made painfully clear to me.

>These men had lived with one another for years. My own time with them amounted to little more than a drop in the bucket. They had no reason to treat me as anything more than a casual prisoner, or at best a serving girl.
I'd reminded myself of that countless times, but it only served to deepen my sense of loneliness.

7. Chapter 2-2

Sorry for the wait...

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 2 - 2<p>

May 1865

It had been three months since we'd moved the headquarters to Nishi Hongwanji.

>"There's a lot more room, butâ€¦"
More room meant, well, farther to walk.

>I'd walked through it nearly every day for several weeks, and I was finally beginning to learn my way around.<p>

â€¦

>As I turned a corner near the back of the compound, I caught sight of someone sitting in the shadows.
"There you are, Sanan. Your food's ready."

>"Oh, hello. Thank you."
The snow had disappeared, the cherry blossoms had bloomed and fled, and now the swallows and the heat had come.

>Sanan and I exchanged a pair of smiles, and I held out my hands to let the breeze brush across them.
"It's really gotten warm lately."

>"Yes, it has. Unfortunately, the heat and the sunlight aren't particularly pleasant for me."
"Reallyâ€¦?"

>I hadn't thought the sun was particularly strong that day, but to Sanan, who had to hide in the shadows or stay indoors during the day, it must have seemed unbearable.
The night he'd...changed...Sanan's hair had turned white, and his eyes had been a thirst for blood.

But to look at his peaceful smile now, it was hard to imagine that night had even been real. If someone had taken me aside and said it was all a bad dream, I would have believed them.

>It hadn't been a dream, though, and now Sanan spends his days avoiding being seen and hiding from the sunlight.
The Shinsengumi's greatest secretâ€¦

>"...Here it is."
For just a moment, the sun lit on Sanan's hair.

>I don't know if it was a trick of the light or simply my mind being foolish, but in that moment, his hair was a brilliant white.
"Ah!"

>"Is something the matter?" he asked, "You look as though you've seen a ghost, which I hardly feel is polite."
"Oh! N-No! Nothing at all!"

>He looked perfectly normal now, of course. Surely, I thought, I must have simply imagined it.
Even if I had, there was no denying that he was the same man who had gone mad with bloodlust. It wasâ€|unnerving.

â€|

>Heisuke and I made our way through the crowded-as-usual streets of Kyoto at a brisk pace.
"You know, I haven't gone out on patrol with you in quite a while, Heisuke."

>"Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess not. Edo had me pretty busy."
He then turned to me with a wide grin, "Shin and Sano didn't bug you while I was gone, did they?"

>"No, they were perfect gentlemen. I'm fine."
I couldn't manage to suppress a short giggle.

>"They look out for me when we're out on patrol, but I still haven't found any information about my father, thoughâ€|"
He frowned and looked away, "Yeah, I stopped by your place in Edo after you told me where to find it, but...uhâ€|"

>He couldn't seem to find the words he was looking for, and instead just kicked at a clump of dirt in frustration.
"Ohâ€| Well, thank you for taking the time to look anyway."

>Heisuke looked up in time to see my face fall, and gave me a good-natured pat on the shoulder.
"C'mon, cheer up! Who knows? He might just pop up some day!"

>"You're right. Besides, you're all helping me look, so I've got to find him sooner or later. But what about you? You haven't been back to Kyoto in a whileâ€|"
"Hm. Well...I sort of feel like the town has...changed. So have the peopleâ€|"

>"Heisukeâ€|?"
The smile he'd put on to cheer me up a moment ago was gone.

>Nostalgia and melancholy weren't like himâ€|
"Hmâ€|?"

>Heisuke's head jerked up a fraction of a degree, and he looked across the street. He stood up on his toes and waved.
"Hey! Souji! Find anything over there?"

>"Nope. Everything's normal."
Okita was out on patrol as well, although his route took him through a different part of the city than ours. He gave me a short nod of acknowledgement, then looked back toward Heisuke with a snicker.

>"...Well, normal for now, at least. I'm sure things'll pick up once the shogun gets here."
"The shogun's coming to visit Kyoto," I asked.

>"Yep. It's got Kondou all worked up, too."
If the shogun was visiting, that was a chance for the Shinsengumi to be noticed.

>Kondou's reaction to that possibility was easy to imagine. I giggled.
"Oh yeah?" said Heisuke. "...Yeah, I bet he isâ€|"

>That...didn't seem like Heisuke.
Had something happened that I didn't know about?

>I looked over to Okita, hoping that he might help, butâ€|
"*cough* *cough*"

>"Okitaâ€|? Are you all right?"
His face was tight with pain, and his coughing was getting worse. He glanced up, but his gaze swept past me and across the street.

>His eyes narrowed at something behind me, and I turned in time to see a ronin stumble backwards.
"Whoa whoa! Wadda ya mean, 'no'?!"

>"Stop it! Let go of me!"
"We're patriots, fightin' every day to kick those damn foreigners out of our country! The least you can do is give us a little booze! Or maybe even, heh, a little...companyâ€|?"
>Across the street, a clump of men-perhaps three or four-were harrassing a young girl.
I didn't know what they were up to, but it didn't look pleasant.
>"We have to help her!"
I felt Heisuke tense up next to me.
>"I know! Stay here, Chizuru-"
Before he could finish, a flash of blue cloth shot past us, toward the dangerous knot of men.
>"Well well well. Guess being a patriot doesn't mean what it used to if we've got men like you throwing it around."
The usual crowds shuffled away from Okita and the men as quickly as they could. None of them wanted to be nearby once words were put away and swords unsheathed.
>The ronin's eyes found Okita's jacket, and the men stiffened.
"Youâ€| You're one of those Shinsengumi fellas, ain't ya!"
>"Ah, you must be the brains. So tell me chief, what's it gonna be?"
His lips curled back into a predatory smile as his hand fell to the haft of his sword. There was no mirth in that rictus grin, and the ronins' faces abruptly grew several shades paler.
>They were only somewhat deflated, however-not entirely punctured-and their ringleader made one more attempt.
"Goddammit. Get outta here, ya brown-nosing son of a bitch!"
>Heisuke appeared next to Okita, "Shut up. If you really wanna live, maybe you should follow your own advice."
The sight of two of the Shinsengumi's notorious blue jackets standing shoulder to shoulder was apparently enough of an argument for the Ronin. The last of the color drained from their faces, and they turned tail and ran.
>"You aren't going to go after them? Arrest them?" I demanded.
"And charge them with which crime, exactly? Didn't figure you for the iron fist sort."

He was right, of course. They'd had crime on their minds certainly, but they hadn't actually committed one.

>"I-Iron fistâ€|?"
"What are you so worked up about? ...Ah, never mind. Forget about it."

>I glanced at Heisuke, not sure what to make of his peculiar tone.
"Umâ€| My name is Kaoru Nagumo. Thank you for saving me."

>I watched as the girl gave Okita a quick bow.
She was so refined; so lady-like.

>Even dressed like a girl, I doubted I could ever be as elegant as her. I'd only just begun to feel sorry for myself when suddenly I felt a hand on my arm.
"Woah! O-Okita?!"

>"Calm down, kid. Just c'mere and stand next to her."
"Umâ€|"

>He shoved me next to the girl we'd just rescued, then stepped back to stroke his chin thoughtfully.
"U-Umâ€| Okitaâ€|?"

>I glanced nervously toward the girl, and gave her my best attempt at a smile, under the circumstances.
The smile she gave me in return was beautiful, but there was something about it that seemed...odd.

>"Just as I thought. They look just like each otherâ€|"
He seemed to be talking mostly to himself, but as soon as the words left his mouth, I realized what had seemed odd to me.

>"We look alikeâ€|?"
No...no, it was more than that. We were too much alike. It was almost as if I were looking into a mirror, but a

mirror with a will of its own, and wearing much better clothes.
>The longer I looked at her, the more uncomfortable I felt.
I shuddered.
>"Really? I don't think they look alike at all," said Heisuke.
"No no no. They're practically identical. Dress the kid up like a girl, and you wouldn't be able to tell 'em apart." said Okita.
>The girl-Kaoru-was looking straight at me, as if she hadn't heard a word Okita had said.<p>

I had to say something, but...what?
>Perhaps she saw through my confusion, or perhaps it was something else-
"I wish to thank you properly, but I'm afraid you've caught me in the middle of an important errand which I must attend to. Please forgive my rudeness."
>She bowed quickly to Okita.
"I hope I will be able to repay you soon, Okita of the Shinsengumi."
>And with that, the girl who called herself Kaoru disappeared into the crowds of Kyoto, although the unease her presence had created in me remained.
With a mischievous grin, Heisuke dug a playful elbow into Okita's ribs.
>"Hey hey hey! Looks like she's got the hots for you, Souji!"
"Ha! Oh Heisuke! Is that really what you think? You've got a long way to go before you're at Sano's level."
>"What? Hey! What the hell's that supposed to mean?!"
Their back-and-forth continued, but my mind was elsewhere. Last night's rain had left a number of puddles on the road, and when I looked into them I saw a strange girl who looked just like me.
>"Kaoru, huh?"
Wind caught the surface of the puddle, sending a flurry of ripples across it. My face quirked into a small smile, but the face in the puddle didn't smile back.
>"C'mon Chizuru! Let's get moving," called Heisuke.
"All right! I'm coming!"
>Wasting no more time on a puddle, I turned and ran toward Heisuke and Okita, already on their way back to headquarters.<p>

...
>The temple was much larger than the compound in Mibu, as advertised. The entire Shinsengumi could gather in the new common room with space to spare.
As Kondou spoke, his voice echoed grandly throughout the hall.
>"By now, I imagine you have all heard that Iemochi Tokugawa, the 14th Shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate, will be visiting our city of Kyoto."
His grin widened and he paused for dramatic effect.

>"The Shinsengumi have been asked to guard him as he passes through the city on his way to Nijo Castle!"
The Shinsengumi...guard the shogun?!
>Almost immediately, the room exploded in cheers.
Hijikata smirked.
>"Heh! Too hard for them to ignore us after Ikeda and Hamaguri, huh? All that work's finally paying off."
"Guess you could say the fate of the country'll be resting on our swords, huh?"
>Okita let out a snort of laughter as he spoke, but there was something in what he said that put me on edge.
Then again, it wasn't as I'd be going to guard the shogun!
>"Parade guards, eh?" said Itou, "If only Sanan were still with us. We have truly lost a valuable ally!"
They'd never told Itou the truth about Sanan.
>In fact, the entire incident surrounding his transformation had been covered up. Only a few of the men of the Shinsengumi knew the

truth.
Perhaps Kondou felt guilty for deceiving him, because I saw a brief flicker of bitterness cross his face before he spoke.

>"Well, at any rate, things are going to be rather hectic here very soon, so we ought to get our assignments hashed out. To begin with, I'd like Toshi, Souji and myself to-"
"Sorry Kondou, but you think maybe Souji can sit this one out? I think he's getting sick."

>Kondou looked from Hijikata to Okita and back.
"What? Souji, is this true? Are you all right?"

>Okita gave a sad smile, "The Demon's just being a mother hen, sir. I think I'm fine."
Hijikata scowled at him and folded his arms, "Don't give me that crap. You just about coughed up a lung earlier."

>Okita sighed, "Fine, fine. Think someone's being a little overprotective, thoughâ€|"
His smile had turned a little bitter as he spoke, but he looked fineâ€| Perhaps Hijikata was just being overprotective.

>I didn't have much time to dwell on it, however, before-
"...Heisukeâ€|?"

>"Uh...Um, Kondouâ€| I'm not...feeling so great eitherâ€|"
Kondou frowned and turned to his youngest captain.

>"You too, Heisuke? This is our time to shine! I was hoping to have all of us there to greet the shogunâ€|"
Heisuke sighed and closed his eyes.

>"Yeah...sorry."
"Oh, no, no, your health comes first. Always! I'm sure you'll have another chance. I'll just have to make sure you get to do something spectacular!"

>Kondou did his best to simply wave it off, but it was easy to see his genuine concern for Okita and Heisuke.
Once he had finished inspecting the rest of the soldiers and sending them off on their assignments, Hijikata turned to me.

>"All right, what're you going to do?"
Hijikata flicked his gaze toward me.

>"...Um?"
"Don't give me that. I'm asking if you're coming with us or not."

>"I-I can go too?!"
Kondou gave a bark of laughter.

>"Of course! We certainly won't mind. After all, you're practically one of us. If you want, I'd love to have you come."
Could I? Could I really goâ€|?

>I hesitated for a moment, confused, and Okita and Heisuke laughed.
"You don't need to worry about yourself, kid. Nobody's gonna be stupid enough to try and attack the shogun."

>Heisuke nodded and smiled, "Why don't you go? I'd be surprised if anyone did so much as draw a sword."
It didn't seem quite fair to me that I wasn't even a soldier and I could go, while they were stuck back at the compound.

>Stillâ€| I'd felt drained lately, with the lack of information we'd been able to uncover about my father. Perhaps this would be just the thing to cheer me up.
"I'll go!"

>Perhaps the excitement of the occasion was infectious, as I felt a steel in my spine that hadn't been there before.
If so, however, it appeared Hijikata was immune.

>"Calm down. You're just carrying messages. Think you can handle that?"<p>

â€|

Right, left.

>Right, left.
My footsteps echoed softly through the night.

>"Owwwâ€¦| My legs are starting to cramp upâ€¦|"
I decided it was best I take a short break and stopped to look up at the castle.
>In the early days of the Tokugawa shogunate, Nijo Castle had been a place for the shogun to stay on his way to the capital. It had been a while since a shogun had actually stayed in it, though.
We'd met the shogun on the road and begun our escort about thirty minutes earlier, and had arrived at the castle relatively recently.
>By now, I imagined, Kondou, Nagakura, Inoue and the men were greeting the officials and other important people in the shogun's retinue.
"Well, I've got a job to do too."
>More specifically, it was my job to tell all the soldiers when to change shifts, and generally carry messages back and forth.
A glorified errand-girl, in other words.
>"This means I'm not totally useless...right?"
Time to get back to work, then.
>Even a short walk around Nijo Castle was enough to see several blue jackets, all of them on guard, none of them nervous or anxious.
"Well, of courseâ€¦| After all, the castle's really well-guarded. Only an idiot would try to-"
>A sudden chill ran down the length of my spine.
I froze.

>"Ah!"
â€¦|I knew the feeling.
>Two feet of cold steel, waiting to find their way into you.
Eyes shining with a lust for blood and violence.
>I'd never hoped to find myself accustomed to such a horrible thing, but in the time since I'd begun living with the Shinsengumi, I had felt it more than once.
I suppose they would have called what I felt radiating from the shadows, "bloodlust."
>My eyes were drawn up toward the roof, where no normal person would ever think to look. A large wall cast a shadow, shielding a section of the roof from the moonlight.
There they stood.

>"You!"
"...So, you've noticed us. Not too slow, thenâ€¦|"
They looked very distinctive, unlike any soldiers I'd ever seen before, but three sets of piercing eyes scattered my thoughts and made it difficult for me to think.
I had recognized them; now I had to put names to facesâ€¦|
>Chikage Kazama was the one with short blonde hair and red eyes.
Kyuju Amagiri was the one with reddish-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. He appeared to be the oldest of the three.
>Kyo Shiranui appeared to be the youngest with wavy black hair pulled back in a top-knot.
They were connected somehow to both the Satsuma and the Choshu, and they'd made an effort to impede the Shinsengumi at Ikeda, and again at Hamaguri.
>Whoever they were, they did not belong at the shogun's castle!
"Wh-Why are you here?!"
>"Hey little girl, you oughta be asking yourself how we got here, not why! ...It was pretty easy, you know. A little human wall doesn't mean shit to a demon," said Kyo.
"We are here for a specific purpose," added Amagiri. "That purpose is you, Chizuru Yukimura. We are here for you."
>"I...I don't understandâ€¦| A demonâ€¦|? What do you mean? And why are you here forâ€¦| No...no, you must be joking!"
"...How can you ask what a demon is? Perhaps you're the one joking here. After all, you are one, just like us."
>Kazama stepped forward, the shadows following him like a cloak.
When Amagiri spoke, it was calm and peaceful, as if he were trying to reason with a frightened child.
>"Do your injuries heal quickly? Too quickly,

perhaps?"
"Wh-What?!"

>"Do you heal from injuries faster than any human could?"
"W-Well, Iâ€¦"

>I couldn't bring myself to answer that, so I pursed my lips and remained silent instead.
Shiranui's eyes narrowed.

>"What the hell? Maybe it'll be quicker if we just give her a demonstration."<p>

Kazama gazed blankly at us.

>"Enough, Shiranui. I don't care if she admits it or not. We're here for a reason, and that hasn't changed."
His eyes dropped to the kodachi at my waist.

>"Her family name is a demon's and she carries the Demon of the East's kodachi. That is evidence enough."
My family name? What was wrong with "Yukimura"?

>I didn't understand what he was saying, but that didn't stop the cold sweat that I could feel inching down my spine.
It felt almost as though the darkness itself was coming for me.

>"Then again, it isn't as though we need your permission to kidnap you." he paused a moment, "Female demons are rare. Now, come with meâ€¦"
His hand stretched out from the darkness, pale and grasping, like the tentacle of some hideous subterranean monster-

>Then, out of nowhere, a blade flickered through the night.
"Whoa there, pal. Tryin' to pick up chicks in a back alley? That's not creepy at all."

>I turned and felt myself slightly relax when I saw Harada and Saito.
Kazama turned slowly, a snide look in his eyes, "â€¦You again? The culture and the nose of a dog, I see."

>"Once could say the same of you," remarked Saito.
Sword and spear glinted in the moonlight, and Kazama stepped back, momentarily stymied.

>"Harada! Saito!"
My legs felt suddenly weak as if the now-shattered tension had been the only thing keeping me standing. I teetered backwards, my balance momentarily lost-

>A strong, sinewy hand caught me and pulled me back, its grip hard as steel.
"Stay back."

>Hijikata.
One hand guided me behind him even as the other drew his sword.

>"Hnn. I figured you were here for the shogun's head. What do you want from a kid?"
"I've little interest in you or the shogun at the moment. The matter at hand concerns only we demons."

>Hijikata quirked his brow at Kazama.
"Demons?"

>His eyes narrowed.
"Hehâ€¦ Haven't seen these punks since Hamaguri."

>Harada smirked.
As he drew his spear back to a ready position, I saw Shiranui's hand move toward the gun on his hip.

>"True, though I feel little at this reunion." said Saito in a bored tone.
Saito's hand tightened around his sword, and Amagiri's feet shifted into a stronger stance.

>Tension hung in the air so thick I could scarcely breath.
They were a powder keg, ready to explode. Even the slightest movement could be enough to set them off.

>As slowly as I could, I moved my trembling hand toward the hilt of my Kodachi.
I'd nearly reached it when a voice whispered in my ear.

>"Don't worry about the commander and the captains."
"Y-Yamazaki?! When did youâ€¦?"

>He'd appeared as silently and invisibly as if he had been a shadow himself.
"I've been ordered to return you to headquarters."

>"Thenâ€|you're telling me to run away?"
it was true that if I remained, it was unlikely I could actually be of help to anyone.

>"Iâ€|"
I glanced back the three "demons" and then back to Yamazaki.

>"...I'm going to stay here."
Yamazaki's brow twitched momentarily in surprise.

>"You don't understand. What do you hope to accomplish by remaining here?"
"I...I know that staying here might not be the smartest idea. And I know that I probably won't be able to help. In fact, I might even get in the wayâ€|"

>I paused a moment.
"...But I have to. I'm sorry."

>They'd called me a demon, and told me to come with them.
I still didn't know what they'd meant by that. I needed to know the truth.

>"You have a reason to stay then, and conviction. I can admire that." He sighed, "Unfortunately, I have my orders. Just as you must remain true to what you believe is right, so must I."
"Wha-?!"

>Yamazaki reached for my arm, ready to take me with him by force.
His hand had nearly reached me when I felt a bolt of lightning race up my spine. I spun around to see Shiranui; his hand wrapped tight around the grip of his pistol, and his eyes aflame with the heat of a blacksmith's forge.

>"Hold on there, buddy. The princess says she wants to stay, so she stays. You gotta learn when to let the girl go!"
Harada grunted in frustration.

>With his last word, Shiranui launched himself toward us, just as Harada leapt to intercept him.
Kyuju seemed annoyed.

>"*sigh* There are times when quick decisions are important, but Shiranui's short temper can be problematic."
"Perhaps," said Saito, "but you seem uninterested in stopping him."

>Saito and Amagiri had maneuvered nearly into striking distance of one another.
"Dammit! What the hell are you doing?!"

>The brewing fight had gone from a brawl, to a set of three duels. Hijikata threw me an angry look before turning to glare at Kazama.<p>

I wrapped my fingers around the haft of my kodachi, and looked at Kazama. There...there had to be something I could do!

>"Get out of here, you Idiot! He'll tear you apart! Yamazaki, keep her out of this!"
Hijikata edged sideways, putting himself more firmly between Kazama and myself.

>The other man glared at him his mouth thinning to a tight line.
"Desperate peasants. I suppose you take some joy from impeding us?"

>"Says the pot to the kettle. The reminds me," said Hijikata, "I haven't paid you back for the man you killed at Hamaguri, have I?"
The air between them fairly hummed with tension.

>Apart though I was, I could still feel their intensity. It was hard to breathe.
Two more steps, and they would be within the reach of one-another's swords.

>"Hmph. You wish to kill me, and put my body as an offering on the grave of the man you lost?"
"Don't be an idiot. I'd rather send you to apologize to him in person."

>One more stepâ€|
It began so fast that I heard Hijikata's sword slither from its scabbard in the same instant that I heard it strike Kazama's blade.

>"Ah!"
The two swords ground against one another, screaming in

protest. Even from a distance away, I'd felt the impact when they'd met, but Kazama seemed unphased.

>Hijikata's eyes flicked toward me, and his hands tightened on his sword.
"What the hell do you want with this kid anyway?!"

>"Chizuru is too much for you," replied Kazama, "We've come to take her off your hands. Quite simple."
"And just what's that supposed to mean?!" barked Hijikata.

>Their blades shuddered and danced too fast for my eyes to follow. All I could catch was the flicker of movement as the moonlight caught them, and the flash of sparks when they met.
They leapt at each other, blades flashing, and met for a moment.

>The two men sprang away, circled, then leapt forward again.
The clipped strands of Kazama's hair drifted away on a cool evening breeze.

>"â€|I see."
There were no signs of fear on his face.

>Instead, I saw what I thought was perhaps the tiniest flicker of respect.
He lowered his sword.

>"What the hell is this?"
Both men stepped back, their fight clearly finished.

>"...Further fighting serves no purpose. We will do nothing more than attract unwanted attention."
Amagiri's voice was calm; as deep and harsh as two boulders grinding together.

>Kyo sneered, "What, you talkin' to me? C'mon, I know when to leave a party."
Kazama looked at his companions momentarily, then nodded.

>"Yes. Our suspicions have been confirmed. We've no need to stay. This time, we only came to say hello."
Saito narrowd his eyes.

>"Do you really believe we'll simply allow you to walk away?"
"Then call your men. You three may survive, but how many of your soldiers will we slaughter before we escape? Would you spend their lives so easily?"

>There was no doubt that Kazama and his companions were powerful. There was no edge of arrogance in his voiceâ€| Only cold fact.
They left silently, fading into the darkness, but as he did Kazama spoke to me one last time.

>"I will return for you. Soon."
He was far out of arm's reach, but his words felt as if they brushed against my cheek, cold and threatening.

>A shiver ran up my spine.
"Whoa! Are you all right, Chizuru?"

>I took the hand Harada offered, and pulled myself to my feet.
Hijikata was still staring intently out into the darkness, but when he spoke it was to me.

>"...Kid. You got any idea why they were after you?"
I hesitated.

>They had said I was one of them. Kazama had invited me to go with himâ€|
Had he been telling the truth?

>I didn't know.
"Um...I'm not sure."

>There was really nothing more I could say.<p>

â€|

So much had happened. My mind spun, full to bursting.

>Once the rest of the men returned, there was a meeting among the captains.
The subject of that meeting was the three men who'd appeared at Nijo Castle: Chikage Kazama, Kyuju Amagiri, and Kyo Shiranui.

>They had called themselves demons, and their previous encounters

with the Shinsengumi suggested that they were involved, somehow, with the Satsuma and Choshu.
Although it wasn't clear if the three men were members of any domain, the Satsuma and Choshu were the most vocal imperialist domains.

>What was clear was they - Kazama, Amagiri, and Shiranui - were not to be taken lightly.
There was another problem, howeverâ€|

>Why had they come for me?
Hijikata asked if I had any idea why they would have targeted me, but I was as desperate to know as he was.

>They'd called me one of them, and they'd known my last name. Kazama had pointed out my kodachi, although I didn't understand what he'd said.
I couldn't bring myself to tell Hijikata and the captains. What if they didn't believe me? I didn't believe meâ€|

>My name is Chizuru Yukimura.
I am the daughter of my father and my mother. I am a normal girl; nothing out of the ordinary.

>My only memento of my mother, my kodachi, lay in my palm. I squeezed it tight.
Who am I?

8. Chapter 2-3

This one's a little shorter than the others.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 2-3<p>

June 1865

The compound was alive with noise and movement.

>I passed several soldiers in the halls, each one of them excited about something.
What was going on?

>The sound of someone fast approaching drew my attention elsewhere.
"*Pant* *Pant* This is...this is unconscionable! Never, in all myâ€|!"

>"Itou? Is something wrong?!"
"Yes! Yes, I'd say everything is wrong!"

>Still out of breath, he paused.
"Why should I be made to bare my skin in the same room as those...those savages?!"

Itou's explanation was anything but.

>"Umâ€| Is there something going on today?"
Itou did his best to collect himself, shakily adjusting his hair and clothing before he spoke.

>"A supposed doctor that Kondou met during the Shogun's visit has come here."
His eyes narrowed and he shuddered.

>"He is conducting...physical examinations."
With a disdainful sniff, he glared pointedly across the hall, toward the area he'd just left.

>The men were getting physical checkups, that much I knew. Given my...particular situation, I'd been exempted by the captains, who had also given me special instructions to stay away.
Itou cleared his throat.

>"That hairless monster! He demanded that I remove my clothes! In front of everyone! When I refused, as any decent man would do, he attempted to remove them himself. By force! And the rest of them just...just stood there! What sort of uncultured savages are they?!"
"Savages" seemed a bit strongâ€|

>At any rate, perhaps I should go see just what a physical entailedâ€| I was a doctor's daughter, after all.
"What's the

doctor's name?"

>"I believe he called himself Ryojun Matsumoto."
What?!

>"Waitâ€| Doctor Matsumoto?!"
When I'd first come to Kyoto, my plan had been to try and find Doctor Matsumoto. My father had told me that I could rely on the man if I ever needed anything.

>Unfortunately, he'd been away on business when I'd arrived, and after thatâ€|
"I'm going to go watch the physical exams!"

>There was no time to waste!
"Oh myâ€| So you want to see those savages? What peculiar tasteâ€|"

â€|

"Is...this itâ€|?"

>I could hear loud voices from insideâ€|
"Oh! ...Ohâ€|"

>The scene froze me in place.
Nagakura, Saito, Heisuke and Harada stood amongst the rank-and-file soldiers...half-naked.

>The man I assumed was Doctor Matsumoto looked up from his notes.
"All right, next."

>Nagakura gave the man a silly grin.
"At last! My turn! Check this out, Doctor!"

>He started flexing his muscles and grunting.
"Hm? Hm?! Wadda ya think?! You're looking at the amazing product of years of training!"

>Heisuke gave a bark of laughter.
"Your body's fine, Shin. I think it's your head the doctor oughta be taking a look at."

>Nagakura's gaze flicked at his youngest fellow captain.
"What's that? You say you want me to beat the daylights out of you?"

>The doctor waited patiently for him to sit and when he did, Doctor Matsumoto grabbed him by the chin and looked at his eyes.
"You're fine, Shinpachi Nagakura. Move along. Next!"

>Nagakura blinked and then narrowed his eyes.
"Whoa, hold on there, Doc! You gotta get a good look at this-"

>"No, you're quite fine. Healthy as a horse. And I've seen quite enough, thank you."
Nagakura started to protest but Harada stopped him by pulling him away from the doctor.

>"You're holding up the line, Shinpachi. Get moving, all right?"
Nagakura turned back to Doctor Matsumoto.

>"I'm just saying, I don't really think you've had time to fully examine-"
Saito was becoming annoyed.

>"A medical examination is for finding problems, not showing off. Now move."<p>

It wasn't difficult to see why Itou had been so desperate to escape. I couldn't imagine him as part of such a display.

>Doctor Matsumoto looked up from his notes to the current rank-and-file soldier sitting before him.
"You need to take better care of your digestive system. Here. Take this after every meal."

>He looked down into his bag.
"Hm. Looks like I'm out of medicine."

â€|

I was waiting outside when Matsumoto stepped out of the room where he was conducting the examinations.

>"Um, excuse me!"
"Yes?"

>He looked at me for a moment, his eyes narrowed in curiosity.
"Well, I need to fetch some more medicine, so perhaps

now is a good time for a break. Can you give me a hand?"

>"Ohâ€¦| Y-Yes, of course!"
What luck!

â€¦|

"Um, Doctor Matsumotoâ€¦|"

>"Ah, Doctor. Hello, Yukimura."
Kondou appeared, just as I was preparing to introduce myself to the doctor.

>"I see you've found her already."
"Yes, thanks to you."

>"What?"
I was utterly lost.

>Doctor Matsumoto laid a gentle hand on my shoulder.
"Chizuruâ€¦| i came here to see you. Kondou told me that Kodo's daughter was staying with the Shinsengumi."

>"Oh...I seeâ€¦|"
"I knew Kodo and Matsumoto were acquaintancesâ€¦| So, I thought perhaps Matsumoto might be able to give us a clue as to his friend's whereabouts. I looked him up as soon as he returned to Kyoto."

>The Shinsengumi had their own reasons for wanting my father found, but Doctor Matsumoto's appearance was still cause for joy.
"Thank you, both of you."

>They smiled.<p>

â€¦|

>Doctor Matsumoto went on to explain that he had just barely missed me when he'd left for Edo as I came to Kyoto.
He'd received all my letters, but once he'd finally returned, he had no idea where I'd gone, and consequently couldn't come find me.

>Kondou's mention of my presence had taken him quite by surprise.
"I'm sorry that I missed you. You must have had a rough time of it." He paused and then, "Is there anything you need?"

>"No, I'm doing all right."
I smiled reassuringly and then, "So, Doctor Matsumotoâ€¦| About my fatherâ€¦|"

>His face took on a grim cast, and before he even spoke I knew what his response would be.
"Unfortunately, I know no more about where Kodo might be than you do."

>"I...I see."
The defeated tone of my voice surprised me.

>I suppose on some level I had believed that Doctor Matsumoto would have some sort of miraculous revelation about my fatherâ€¦|
Foolish of me, of course, but that didn't make the truth any less devastating.

>Kondou simply nodded.
"I hear you've become involved with the...um...the treatment. You know what I mean, don't you? Kodo's experimentsâ€¦|"

>Yes, I knew what he meant. The experiments my father had conducted with some strange concoction that could make people go mad.
"Please, tell me about it. I want to know everything my father was doing."

>He nodded.
"Kodo was working with the Shinsengumi under orders from the shogun to create what were called the 'furries'. Furies are humans with high-demonic strength and speed, and phenomenal healing abilities."

>"Furiesâ€¦|"
It was the first time I'd heard the word.

>The doctor paused for a moment to look at me, then continued.
"The substance that transforms normal men into these furies is called the Water of Life. In China, they call it 'sentan.' In short, it grants immortality."

>"Furiesâ€¦| Water of Lifeâ€¦|"
It sounded more like something from a fairy tale than real lifeâ€¦|

>But there was something in the tone of Doctor Matsumoto's voice that said he was telling the truth.
"I've already heard about how it makes you strong and hard to killâ€¦ But doesn't it cause so much pain that it makes most people go crazy? And even if you survive that, then even the smell of blood can make you go crazy againâ€¦"

>Doctor Matsumoto nodded slowly, then pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. He looked very tired.
"So you know about that tooâ€¦"

>"Yesâ€¦"
They were human, but...not human. Perhaps they were something entirely different now?

>I couldn't see how this "Water of Life" could ever be used for good. Even if it had healed Sanan's arm, he suffered greatly in the process.
"Why?"

>It came out more a moan than a question.
My father would never want to ruin the life of another, but because of what he'd done, people had suffered-some had even died.

>"Why was my father doing this?"
But it wasn't just my fatherâ€¦

>I was sure no one involved had wanted such a terrible outcomeâ€¦
"Perhaps that is why Kodo left. His conscience would no longer allow him to continue."

>These words seemed to upset Kondou who turned to the doctor and said, "But the Water of Life was an opportunity given to us by the shogun, to help strengthen the Shinsengumi!"
The doctor only shook his head.

>"It was an experiment, and it has failed. You should put it behind you. I'm sure the shogunate has abandoned it as well."
Kondou frowned, perhaps unhappy that Doctor Matsumoto would question the shogunate's original decision.

>"You've seen what happened to the men it was tested on, Kondou. It cannot be allowed to continue. This experiment is inhumane and you know it."
"Hrnn."

>Kondou gave a noncommittal grunt and fell silent.
I was sure Kondou knew just how dangerous it was to use the Water of Life, but the shogunate had come to him with a request.

>Perhaps he was unable to refuse, even if he wanted to.
Silence fell like a thick blanket.

>It had grown almost unbearable, when-
"An outsider had no right to object."

>"Sanan?!"
He was especially pale, which seemed to be one of the consequences for being active during the day.

>"Is it okay for you to be up right now?"
"Sanan, you look pale." said Kondou, frowning.

>"Don't worry about me."
He bowed quickly, his mouth a compressed line, and turned to regard the doctor with a cool gaze.

>"We use this treatment effectively, and at our own discretion."
"It's dangerous, and far too strongâ€¦"

>Sanan's expression softened slightly.
"We have continued Kodo's research. I am, as you can see, living proof. So to speak."

>As Sanan did indeed prove, it was possible to drink the Water of Life and retain your sanity. It just wasn't easy.
"Perhaps you're right, but one success hardly means you have unlocked its secrets."

>Sanan narrowed his eyes again.
"I respectfully disagree. With continued research and modification, we will have many more successes, and fewer casualties."

>"This isn't a matter of fewer casualties. It's a matter of casualties, period! It isn't worth the deaths of any more of your men."
Sanan was now glaring at the doctor.

>"The men who have given their lives are the foundation of our work. I won't allow them to have died in vain."
"But-"
>"All right, that's enough. From both of you," said Kondou. "Why don't we discuss this some other time?"
It was my private opinion that they were unlikely to agree, no matter what time they discussed the subject, but I felt it would be polite to keep that to myself.

>"...Very well."
There seemed to be very little in the way of common ground between them, but I could see the merit of both their arguments. Likely Kondou had as well, and had chosen to end things before it got...unpleasant.

>"â€|If you insist, Kondou."
Sanan's face betrayed nothing of what he might be thinking, even when the corner of his mouth quirked up into the beginning of a smile.

>He bowed once more, and left as swiftly as he'd arrived.
Kondou cleared his throat loudly.

>"So, ah, how did the exams go?"
"Ah, yes. About thatâ€|"

>Doctor Matsumoto's face took on the look of someone about to discuss something exceedingly grotesque.
"Nearly a third of your men are sick, or injured, or both."

>"What?!" I nearly shrieked.
"Impossible!"

>"It is not only possible, Kondou, it is the truth. What on Earth have you been doing to these poor men?"
The doctor folded his arms.

>"Cuts, lacerations, bowel painâ€| The entire place is lousy with...well, lice, for one."
"Are you serious?"

>"First, you need to set aside a room dedicated to medical care. Sick men can be sent there. Second, you need to clean this place up. Otherwise, I won't be able to help you."
Kondou frowned.

>"I see. Well, if the good doctor says soâ€|"<p>

â€|

And so we were ordered to clean the entire compound.

>The captains complied, although they certainly seemed less than enthusiastic about the idea.<p>

â€|

>The following day, Doctor Matsumoto returned for an inspection.
"Well, you've certainly cleaned this place upâ€|"

>He looked pleased, if not a little smug.
"It better be," said Nagakura, "We busted our asses."

>Heisuke sighed, seeming tired.
"Yeah, except for Souji. The only thing his ass busted was a chair. Doesn't seem fair to meâ€|"

>Okita frowned.
"Can't blame me if Hijikata's an overprotective old woman."

>Hijikata narrowed his eyes as he turned to him.
"Shut it. You can run around all you want soon as you can go a day without coughing up a lung."

>If Hijikata had any actual concern for Okita's health, his face showed none of it.
Saito smiled.

>"Nonetheless, a clean home is a nice change."
Hijikata nodded.

>"True. The place looks...different. I guess I could get used to this."
"Well," started Harada, "maybe we should clean every day, then."

>"Great idea," laughed Nagakura as he turned to Heisuke, "Make sure

you do a good job, Heisuke!"
The youngest captain glared at him seeming very offended.
>"Me?! Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute here! You've got the most energy, Shin! Don't think you're getting out of this."
"I'll help too!" I offered.
>This brought the smile back to Heisuke's young face.
"Good, good! We'll all give it a shot tomorrow, all right?"
>Nagakura arched his right brow and glanced at us.
"Hey, wait a minute! When exactly did I tell you I was gonna help?"
>Hijikata smirked at him.
"Shinpachi, there's some trash over there. Go throw it away."
>Nagakura folded his arms.
"We aren't starting till tomorrow, right? Heisuke?"
>Saito closed his eyes and smiled.
"Stop running around like that. We've just cleaned, and you're already kicking up dust."
>I was enjoying their banter so much I almost didn't notice Okita quietly step outside.
"Ohâ€|?"
>I could just see Okita and Doctor Matsumoto outside, walking off somewhere together. Where could they be going, I wondered.
I was worried for Okita, butâ€|

He'd be fine so long as Doctor Matsumoto was with him.

>"â€|Yeah."
After the excitement wound down, I excused myself and went back to work.

â€|

I was outside sweeping, bamboo broom in hand, when he appeared.

>"â€|They make you do chores here, do they?"
"What?!"
>The cool, bemused voice had come from behind me.<p>

It took only half a second to realize that it was a voice I'd heard before. Slowly, I turned around.

>"You have the pure blood of a demon running in your veins, and yet you run errands and clean up for a pack of humans?"
Chikage Kazama, just as I'd suspected.

>His face was a mixture of surprise and sneering disgust as he looked down at me through cold eyes.
I took the broom in both hands like a staff, and stepped into what I hoped was a fighting stance.

>"Wh-What are you doing here?!"
"...Hmph."

>It was halfway between a disdainful laugh and an amused snort.
"You mean to fight me with that, hm? Your heritage hasn't blessed you with brains, I see."

>His tone was mocking, but his eyes were like two chips of ice. This was a dangerous man.
What was I to do?! I could hardly face him alone!

>"Calm down. I haven't come here to fight. Not today, at least. I only want to know what, if anything, you have to do with Kodo."
Kodoâ€| That was my father's name. But why would he, of all people, mention my father?

>"You want to know about my father?"
His eyes narrowed.

>"â€|Father? You mean Kodo?"
"If you're talking about Kodo Yukimura, then yes, he's my father."

>"...I see."
I'd seen surprise in his face at first, but now an understanding seemed to have dawned across it.

>Unfortunately, my own confusion had only deepened.
"Why are you

asking about my father?"

>I lowered the broom, my situation temporarily forgotten, when-
"Trying to sneak into the enemy camp alone, huh? Well, not on my watch."

>"Hijikata?!"
He settled into a light fighting stance, placing himself between Kazama and my pathetically ineffectual broom.

>"What're you doin' out here in broad daylight? little early in the day to be pickin' up chicks, pal."
"Get away from her!"

>"Haradaâ€¦ Heisuke!"
"I heard you yelling," said Harada, "Sounded like you were up to something besides cleaning."

>Heisuke gave me a concerned glance.
"You alright, Chizuru? Are you hurt?"

>I nodded, relieved.
"The Mibu's wolves can only fight in a pack, eh?"

>Hijikata narrowed his eyes.
"Watch it."

>I could feel the tension rising by the second, but it was Kazama who attempted to cut through it.
"If you want to play, then I'm happy to oblige, but I'm here today simply to take care of some business. More specifically, to issue a warning. Stop trying to turn humans into demons."

>"...What?"
Humans into demons?

>Was he talking about the Water of Lifeâ€¦? "Not your business," snapped Hijikata.
"Yeah," said Harada. "What makes you think we're gonna listen to a sleazebag who'd attack a girl in broad daylight?"

>Kazama sneered at them.
"Idiots. Are you too blind to see I'm doing you a favor?"

>If he was trying to show the Shinsengumi kindness, it certainly didn't show on his face.
"This is our turf!" barked Heisuke. "You better shut your trap before we gotta do it for you!"

>"Hmph. The smaller the dog, the louder the bark."
Kazama looked away from the captains, as if suddenly entirely uninterested in them, and fixed me with his cold gaze.

>"Kodo is with us now, Chizuru. Do you understand what that means? Your father has abandoned the shogunate."
"Whatâ€¦?"

>His mysterious smile gave me nothing in the way of explanation.
"Why are you here? I suggest you think on that. Carefully."

>Then, with a slow, rippling motion-like a shadow slipping across the ground-he turned his back to us and vanished.
What was happening?

>What were demons, and why had they come after me?
My father was with them? On their side, he must have meant.

>Did that mean he was working with national imperialists?
The inside of my head was a swirling mass of questions and doubts, but the one thing that most concerned me wasâ€¦

>Who were these men who called themselves "demons"?
"What are these 'demons'?"

>Hijikata crossed his arms, his face dark.
"After fighting them, I can say they sure as hell aren't human. Not by a long shot."

>His eyes narrowed further.
"He's skinny as a rail, but he can hit like an ox. Yeah, I'd say 'demon' is a pretty good way to describe him."

>Kazama and his companions clearly had strength and skill far beyond that of most men.
Perhaps they really were monsters of some sort.

>"Well hell," said Harada, "if Hijikata thinks they're demons, then they've gotta be demons."
Heisuke nodded.

>"Yup. He's the Shinsengumi's Demon, after all."
Hijikata was not amused.
>"Shut it you two. This is serious!"
Their playful argument was familiar ground, but it gave me something to hold on to; a small beacon against the darkness.
>"He heâ€|"
I felt myself relax, and a sigh of relief found its way to my lips.

â€|

From then on, Matsumoto visited the compound regularly, to check up on the men of the Shinsengumi.
>The Corps was renamed the Fury Corps, but remained secret.
Still, I couldn't help but wonderâ€| Was it really all right to continue to research the creation of furies?
>It wasn't long before I began to wish I'd never heard of the Water of Life, or Furies.<p>

9. Chapter 2-4

sorry for the wait...

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 2-4<p>

October 1865

After the dust cleared, following the Hamaguri Rebellion, the shogun set about cleaning house.
>The Choshu Domain were declared enemies of the court, and the shogun gathered other domains and launched a military campaign known as the Choshu Expedition.
It was the intention of the shogunate to completely demolish the Choshu Domain, but intervention on the part of Satsuma and some of the other domains lead to an early end for the Expedition with no actual battles fought.
>Perhaps feeling they'd dodged a bullet, the Choshu Domain fell silent for a time. Their obedience was short-lived, however, and before long their disrespect for the shogun became impossible to ignore.
Kondou was asked to accompany an envoy sent to the Choshu to investigate their behavior, but they refused to even meet with the envoy.
>Fed up with their insubordination, the shogunate ordered the Second Choshu Expeditionâ€|<p>

â€|

>"Hey! Guys! Listen up!" shouted Nagakura.
"What is it, Nagakura? Is something wrong?"
>Harada narrowed his eyes.
"What, you run into some outlaw ronin out there?"
>Nagakura crossed his arms and turned to his friend.
"No, it's way worse than that. I heard that Lord Iemochi's dead!"
>"What?!" I practically shrieked.
Lord Iemochi, the 14th Shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate?!
>I could feel my chest tighten.
I'd never seen his face in person, and neither had most of the Shinsengumi.
>Even so, the Shinsengumi had been assigned to guard him in the past, and he was the symbol of the shogunate.
"Are you sure," said Harada, just above a whisper, "Man, this has gotta be the worst time

for something like this to happenâ€|"

>His brows furrowed in concern.
"What's gonna happen to the Choshu Expedition? Have they decided on a new shogun yet?"

>"I don't really know any detailsâ€|" said Nagakura.
"There's no way we can go to war without a leader," stated Harada, "It'd destroy morale."

>Nagakura nodded.
"I know. I've got a real bad feeling about this. The Choshu got off easy. I'm hoping they'll get the pounding they deserve this time, butâ€|"

>"They're only a single domainâ€|" I said, more to my self than to them.
I tried to convince myself that a single domain couldn't cause much of a problem, but I couldn't shake that feeling of dread.

>Soon afterward, the shogunate lead a massive army against the Choshu, but the expense of war weighed heavily on the coffers of the other domains, and they fielded fewer troops than the shogunate had hoped for.
The death of Iemochi was another blow to army morale, and some domains withdrew from the war entirely.

>So it was that the Second Choshu Expedition ended in a shocking defeat for the shogunate army.
That was the moment when the shogunate government, stable for 260 years, began to waver.

â€|

>"It sure has been hot latelyâ€|"
I swept my hand across my face, wiping away several new beads of sweat.

>Kyoto was a nice city, but I could have certainly done without the humid heat.
"...Indeed," was Saito's reply.

>Beneath his usual calm there was a hint of alertness and carefully-restrained violence, and for good reason.
The Choshu had been declared enemies of the court after the Hamaguri Rebellion had driven out of Kyoto, but some feared remnants of their forces had remained behind, in hiding.

>Now more than ever, Saito and the rest of the Shinsengumi had to be alert and focused when on patrol.
"I'll begin with this store."

>He turned to me.
"Wait here. There is nothing for you to do inside."

>"All right."
He gave me a short nod of confirmation, and stepped into the shop with his men.

>His calm voice carried to me as he addressed the people inside.
"I'm from the Shinsengumi. I have come to inspect your store."

>"Y-Yes, sir. Of course."
The store owner sounded nervous.

>I'd been waiting for Saito and his division for a few minutes when I noticed a commotion nearby.
"Hey! Outta the way! You got a couple patriots comin' through here!"

>A number of rather unpleasant-looking ronin were making their way in my general direction, yelling, threatening, and generally intimidating anyone unfortunate enough to cross their path.
"Patriots"? Hardly. Perhaps they considered themselves loyal to the imperial court, but they looked like the lort who only used their supposed patriotism as an excuse to steal and kill.

>These were just the sort of men whom the Shinsengumi was charged with subduing.
"Hey! You deaf?! I told you to move!"

>The ronin tossed a poorly-aimed kick at a child playing in the street.
"Stop-!"

>I'd barely taken a single step toward them, when-
"Desist, you hooligans!"

>I didn't see where she'd come from, but a girl had run out to place herself between the ronin and the child.
"Wassis? You think you

can tell us what to do, lady?!"

>The head hooligan glared at the girl.
"Ha! Some broad wants to pick a fight with us?! Patriots loyal to the emperor?!"

>The man's obviously short fuse had been lit. He made a grab for the girl and missed. I suspected his next attack wouldn't be quite so inaccurate.
I couldn't let that happen.

>"Who're you?" said the thug. "You know this broad?"
"No, I don't."

>"Then howsabout you keep your damn nose outta my goddamn business!"
Flecks of spit flew from his mouth as he roared at me, and my legs suddenly felt somewhat weaker than they had a moment ago.

>But I was committed. I couldn't run now.
"If you truly love your country as you sayâ€|" I started. "â€|Then why do you abuse women and children?"

>I narrowed my eyes.
"A samurai should protect common people, not attack them!"

>"What did you say?!"
A suddenly self-confident bystander shouted, "That's right! You tell him, son!"

>"How'dya like that, ya damn ronin! Patriot, my ass! Get outta my city!"
Something about my speech seemed to have struck a chord with the crowd that had begun to gather. With the cheers, my legs started to regain some of their usual steadiness.

>"You son of a bitch!"
With the rough hiss of metal, the ronin's sword leapt from its scabbard. I suddenly discovered I had difficulty swallowing.

>I could try to dodge, but if I did, he might hit the girl my actions had intended to protect.
â€|No, that wasn't an option. I shut my eyes-

>"Gaagkh!"
"Huh?"

>Slowly, carefully, I opened my eyes.
"You needn't worry. I used the back of my sword."

>"Saito!"
The thug groaned in pain but it appeared he would survive.

>"Urghâ€|hnngâ€| Youâ€|"
Saito turned to a few of his men.

>"Take them to headquarters. They may be Choshu."
"Yes, sir!"

>Working quickly, Saito's men set to work binding the ronin for transport.
Saito's cold eyes fell on me.

>"That was reckless. Why didn't you call me?"
I blushed.

>"I-I'm sorry. I wasn't thinkingâ€|"
Suddenly the girl turned on me.

>"The gentleman is right! You were dreadfully reckless! I had the situation quite well in hand."
"Ahâ€| Umâ€|"

>A scolding damsel was expected, but I hadn't thought that my erstwhile damsel in distress would contribute.
"I'm sorry I made you worryâ€|"

>I gave her a short, slightly confused bow, to which she blinked as if suddenly remembering something very important.
"Oh, butâ€| You did save me, didn't you now?"

>She smiled.
"And I haven't yet thanked you! How crude of me. Thank you."

>She gave a little bow of her own.
"I must say, you're awfully courageous! Most people wouldn't dare confront a ronin so!"

>"No, I didn'tâ€| I mean, Saito and his men saved me. I didn't really do anythingâ€|"
She raised a dainty hand to her mouth in a poor attempt to stifle a giggle.

>"He he. Oh, you needn't be so modest. I suspect that this, our meeting here, is providence. Young ladies must watch out for one

another here in the city!"
"Uhâ€|?"

>Saito glanced from her to me, and an expression flickered across his face that I couldn't quite place.
"â€|You can't expect to fool everyone. There's no need to worry about it."

>"Ummâ€|"
"Oh dear. Was it supposed to be a secret? Perhaps I...shouldn't have mentioned it?"

>"Well...ahâ€|"
I wasn't entirely sure how to respond. How does a person respond to that sort of question?

>She seemed to sense my confusion, and gracefully moved on.
"I'm terribly sorry, but I don't believe I've even asked your name! How terribly boorish of me! I should very much like to be friends, but it is difficult to become acquainted with the nameless. Might I inquire as to who you are, then?"

>"Um, well, this is-"
It seemed only polite to introduce him first, being that he was a good deal more important than I, but the girl seemed to have other ideas.

>"Oh, I know who he is. Mr. Saito, yes? The Shinsengumi is frightfully famous here."
She turned back to me.

>"And you are?"
"My name is Chizuru Yukimura. It's nice to meet you."

>The girl gave a kind smile.
"And it is a pleasure to meet you, Chizuru. You may call me Sen."

>"Ms. Sen?"
"Oh goodness, you needn't be so uptight! You look to be about my age, so I see no reason for us not to speak as contemporaries."

>"Umâ€| So, just Sen, then?"
"Yes, I suppose that will do."

>She grasped my hand between her own, her face open and earnest.
"We must meet again sometime, Chizuru."

>She gave my hand a gentle squeeze, then turned and left, her kimono flapping behind her.
Our encounter was over before I'd had a chance to grasp what was even happening, and so I simply stood, stunned, for a moment or two.

>"Umâ€|"
I glanced up uncertainly at Saito.

>"â€|Is my, um, disguise really so easy to see through?"
If it wasn't, then how had Sen, who'd I'd just met, been able to tell immediately that I was a girl? I had to admit I'd felt like it was a pretty good disguiseâ€|

>Saito looked down at me, a strange expression on his face.
"â€|Who knows?"

>"What? Wait, what's that supposed to mean?!"
His only response was a flicker of a smile. I opened my mouth to protest-

>"We should go," said Saito, all signs of amusement gone. "We've fallen behind already. We must hurry to complete our patrol on time."
He spun on his heel and marched off down the street.

>"...Fine!"
It was clear he had given me all the answers I was going to receive, and so I hurried to catch up, albeit somewhat petulantly.

â€|

>It felt like summer: Each day was hotter than the last.
On this particular sweltering day, I was bringing some tea to Kondou, who was relaxing on the veranda.

>"Here's your tea, sir."
"Oh! Thank youâ€|"

>He had been deep in thought; arms crossed and face stern.
Things had beenâ€|bad since Lord Iemochi's death. Kondou especially was having a difficult time of it.

>Perhaps it was best if I simply left him aloneâ€|
I turned, and had already begun to walk away when he spoke.

>"Matsumoto is examining Souji right now."
His coughing had grown

more violent and more frequent lately, perhapsâ€|
>â€|What did he say?"
"He hasn't said anything yet. I hope it's nothing serious."
>He suddenly got a strange look in his eyes.
"If something happened to Souji, I don't know how I'd be able to face herâ€|"

>â€|Her?"
"Yesâ€|"
>Lines formed across his forehead, and his frown deepened.
"When we left for Kyoto, Mitsu, his older sister, asked me to look out for him."
>He almost looked scared now.
"If I made her mad, I...well, I shudder to think what might happen to me. The very thought is terrifying."
>â€|What would she do to you?"
It wasn't exactly the sort of thing I'd ever thought I'd hear from Kondou of all people. As his descriptions of her behavior became more and more exaggerated, I found myself laughing.
>"Hey, this isn't a laughing matter!"
He shuddered.
>"I'd rather fight off ten ronin than try and argue with her. She'sâ€|quite something."
"That makes two of us."

>"Hijikata?"
Kondou seemed to relax at the sight of his friend.

>"I hope everything will turn out all right, but if something should happen to Souji, then I would like you to be the one to tell Mitsu, Toshi."
Hijikata grimaced then narrowed his eyes, "Like hell I will. That kinda crap is what we have a chief for, Chief."
>Kondou frowned.
"Easy for you to sayâ€|"
>Kondou's behavior had been strange enough, but Hijikata too? Just what sort of person was Okita's sister?
"Oh, rightâ€|"
>Hijikata turned to Kondou.
"Did you hear about the notice board over by Sanjo Ohashi Bridge?"
>The board he was talking about had been set up by the shogunate, to officially and publicly declare the Choshu enemies of the court.
"Some assholes pulled it out and tossed it into the Kamo."

>Kondou nodded.
"Yes, of course I heard about that. Haven't they already replaced it?"
>"They did. Same thing happened. I think they're gonna ask us to keep an eye on it pretty soon."
"It got torn down at night, didn't it? What do you say to using Sanan's Fury Corps, then?"
>Hijikata frowned.
"The Fury Corpsâ€|"
>"You think it's a bad idea?"
Hijikata chose his words carefully, his face grim.
>"They work hard enough, butâ€| They tend to get a little excited. Whatever we give them to do, they end up slaughtering the other side."
He gave a heavy sigh.
>"That's not enough for 'em, though: They go in and hack the corpses to bits. Most of the time they're not even recognizable. Maybe they're doing it to try and hide the Shinsengumi's hand, but they're going too far."
His eyes narrowed.
>"We're not just a pack of murderers. I told 'em to knock it off, but they won't listen. They just wanna play with their corpses. They keep this up, and we're no better than those night-cutters."
"Hmâ€|"

I felt a shiver snake down my spine as he spoke.
>Even more than a year later, I still remembered with terrifying clarity what I'd seen when I first arrived in Kyoto: the furies.
They'd behaved as if possessed by evil spirits; their swords hacking away mercilessly at men already dead.

>It hadn't been hatred or fear that drove them, but some sort of twisted amusement. I didn't think I'd ever forget the half-mad smiles each had worn.
"â€¦I've got a few other ideas."
>"Good, good." said Kondou, "I'll leave the detailed to you then, Toshi. "Ah, yesâ€¦ Have you heard about Lord Yoshinobu Hitotsubashi, the old Guardian of the Shogun?"
Hijikata appeared angry again, "Yeah, what about him? I've heard a couple people say he's like Ieyasu reborn. I dunno about that, but I do hear he's pretty sharpâ€¦"
>Before long, they'd started to discuss politics I couldn't begin to understand and I politely excused myself.<p>

â€¦
>I thought back on what Hijikata had said. It was true that Sanan had been acting strange and the Fury Corps had been getting more and more violent.
There was a lot on my mind, but what worried me the most was the Notice Board.

â€¦
>Just as Hijikata had predicted, a few days later the order came down for the Shinsengumi to guard the notice board.
All divisions not on regular patrol rounds were directed to take turns on guard duty.

>The first day was quiet, and the men on duty spent most of it simply standing around.
"*Yawn* You know I was up all night guarding a damn board? Tiring work, that's for sure."
>He stretched his arms.
"Now, fighting off scores of Choshu punks-that I can do! But guarding a piece of wood? It's just hard to get pumped about that, you know?"
>"Well, it's still an important job."
He opened his eyes and glanced at me.
>"Yeah, yeah, I know. Stillâ€¦ Maybe something will happen tonight."
He folded his arms and turned to Harada.
>"Tonight is...you, right Sano?"
Harada nodded.
>"Sure is. I will discharge my duty with honor and enthusiasm."
Nagakura had just opened his mouth to respond when I heard footsteps approaching us.
>"The whole shogunate army could not defeat a single domain. Do they really believe killing a few nameless ronin for defacing a piece of wood will do them any good?"
The footsteps belonged to Itou, the Shinsengumi's military advisor.
>His tight smile had a twist of irony to it.
Harada glanced at him and narrowed his eyes.
>"You got a problem with the Shinsengumi's duties?"
"Oh no, nothing of the sort. Even guarding a board is an important task."

>He then turned so he faced all of us.
"Well, best of luck to you. If you'll excuse meâ€¦"
>He picked his way deliberately out of the hall, giggling to himself.
As soon as his footsteps had faded out of hearing, Nagakura spat out a curse.
>"As much of a pain in the ass as usual, huh?"
He scoffed.
>"We get hired by the shogunate, and he goes around talking about how much better the emperor is."
Harada's eyes were still filled with anger even though the source of it had left the room.
>"I've caught him sneaking around a couple times, trying to recruit some of our guys into well, something. Who knows what he's up to?"
He gave a heavy sigh.
>"I still don't get why Kondou brought him here."
I wondered that too but said nothing.

>It wasn't just Nagakura and Harada who didn't seem to like Itou much. I'd heard plenty of the other captains, and even some of the soldiers, talking about him in less than glowing terms.
There was no way Itou himself hadn't picked up on it, but he seemed to have larger concerns than his reputation, and had devoted his efforts to increasing his powerbase within the Shinsengumi.
>Whatever was going on with him, I hoped it would resolve itself quickly. The Shinsengumi couldn't afford infighting.<p>

â€|

>Night came and it was time for Harada to go.
"Well, guess it's time. I'm off."

>"Oh...umâ€|"
"What, you wanna tag along?"

>He paused.
"Probably not a good idea, kid. Those demons are still after you, right? I can't take you out on the streets at night."

>"Ughâ€|"
Sitting around all day doing nothing was beginning to chafe. I wanted to help somehow, but Harada was right. If I went with him, I'd just end up getting in the way.

>"Well, please be careful, okay Harada?"
He gave me one of his kind smiles.

>"Sure thing. Thanks."<p>

â€|

>That night they struck, or at least tried to: Eight men from the Tosa Domain challenged Harada and his division in an attempt to tear down the notice board.
The fighting was furious but short. Harada managed to capture some of the perpetrators, although some of those he'd captured later managed to escape.

>Harada and his division were honored by the Aizu Domain for their service to the shogunate and given a reward.
When he was asked how the captured men had managed to escape, he simply replied, "It was too dark to get a good look," and said no more.

â€|

>Several days after Harada's encounter at the notice board, I accompanied the captains to a meal at Sumi.
"Well I'll be damned! You really did it, Sano!"

>Nagakura was brimming with excitement.
"And to think you want to use that reward money to treat us all to some good foodâ€| Well!"

>Okita rolled his eyes and glanced at him.
"If you're going to suck up, you might at least try to mention how he actually got that reward."

>Nagakura's excitement remained uphased.
"I'll get to it! I'm just so touched that he's gonna pay the bill I thinkâ€| I think I might cry!"

>He turned to face us all.
"Tonight's on Sano, guys! Drink as much as you want! Forget your problems!"

>Harada turned on him with narrowed eyes.
"Hey! Don't go nuts, all right?!"

>Heisuke, however, was thinking like Nagakura.
"Thanks, Sano! I'm gonna drink myself stupid!"

>Okita glanced at Hijikata then faced forward again.
"Not everyone here can drink, you know."

>Hijikata smiled.
"There's more to do than drink, you know. Eat, for instance."

>"â€| Yeah, guess you're right. Hell, if Sano's paying, why not?"
I wasn't entirely sure Sumi was the sort of place a girl should be, butâ€| They were treating me like I was one of them; like I'd finally

been accepted. It felt nice.

>The door at the other end of the room slid open.
"Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you for coming."

>An oiran in a beautiful kimono stepped through to greet us with a smile that was somehow both dazzling and demure.
Her skin was as white as porcelain, with soft red highlights. Her lips looked soft and full, and her hair shone in the light like yards of fine silk.

>For a moment I stared in awe of her beauty, my own sex forgotten.
Something flickered in her eyes, but it was gone almost immediately. Then she smiled, and it was like watching a flower bloom.

>"I am Kimigiku, and I will be entertaining you tonight. Please, enjoy yourselves. Food will be arriving shortly."
Indeed it had, and once the food had arrived the party truly began.

â€|

>Heisuke filled his glass yet again and took several sips.
"Man, expensive sake is way different! It just goes down so smooth!"

>Nagakura glanced at Heisuke's plate.
"You haven't even touched your food, Heisuke."

>He grinned.
"If you drink on an empty stomach, you'll get drunk before you even have a chance to enjoy it!"

>Heisuke grinned back at him.
"Whatever. You know how often I get booze this good? Never! Filling up on food'd just be a waste of stomach space!"

>Harada gave a bark of laughter.
"You sound like a bum. Just drink up."

>Heisuke seemed unphased by his crude words.
"Hey, just 'cause you drink like there's a hole in you stomach doesn't mean the rest of us can."

>Nagakura glanced at me.
"You havin' fun, Chizuru? Doesn't look like you're drinking much."

>"Oh, I can't drink, so I'm just enjoying the food."
He smiled.

>"Oh, right. Well, make sure you eat a lot of it, then! We're here to have a good time, so it'd be a damn shame if you didn't have fun."
"Thanksâ€|"

>Still, it was the first time I'd ever eaten anything so expensive.

â€|Although to be honest, I couldn't really taste much of a difference.
"I've heard rumors that the men of the Shinsengumi were like demons or monsters, but from where I sit you look a good deal more handsome than that. Almost like an actor."

>"â€|Yeah, I get that a lot."
Kimigiku and Hijikata catted easily while she poured him his sake, looking almost too beautiful to be real-like they'd stepped out of a painting.

>Next to someone like her, any woman would have felt rather plain. I was no exception, and dressing like a boy certainly wasn't helping.
Nagakura put down his chopsticks having finished his second serving.

>"Still can't believe they gave all this cash just for protecting a board."
He smiled.

>"I mean hellâ€| Imagine how much you would've got if you'd caught all of 'em!"
He glanced at Harada quizzically.

>"How did they get away, actually? you said there were only eight. That should've been pretty manageable."
Heisuke looked up and glanced over at him as well.

>"Yeah! What's up with that?! I mean, you surrounded 'em, didn't you? How'd they get away? And how'd the guys you actually caught

escape?"
Harada sighed and fell silent, his face slipping into a frown.

>He stayed that way for a moment or two, then looked, inexplicably, at me.
"Chizuru, did you go anywhere that night?"

>"What?"
I hesitated, unsure of what he was getting at.

>"No, I didn't go anywhereâ€¦ Why?"
"You're sure. You didn't go anywhere that night?"

>"Yes, I'm sure. I've never left the compound alone, ever."
Again he fell silent, the same frown crossing his face.

>Nagakura glanced at him curiously.
"Hey, what's worng?"

>Harada didn't look up.
When he spoke, his voice was quiet.

>"Maybe it was just a mistake. There wasn't a moon that night. It was dark."
He paused.

>"Noâ€¦no, I saw her up close. There's no way I made a mistakeâ€¦"
"Umâ€¦ Harada? What are you talking about?"

>At last he looked up, straight into my eyes.
"After we'd surrounded the Tosa men who'd tried to take down the notice boardâ€¦ Thisâ€¦girl showed up. She looked just like you. Got in our way. Because of her, our whole formation fell apart."

>"What?"
The whole room had gone silent. Harada barely spoke above a whisper, but every one of us could hear him perfectly.

>A girl who looked just like me?
What did he mean?

>"Well...like they say, shit happens! But tonight, Sano's payin', so let's drink till the sun comes up!"
Heisuke nodded in gleeful agreement.

>"Seconded! Time to find out just how much of this stuff I can handle!"
In just a few minutes, Heisuke and Nagakura had the party back in full swing, but I couldn't get my mind off what Harada had said.

>I'd never left the compound on my own since the time I'd first met the Shinsengumi.
Thenâ€¦what had he seen?

>I feltâ€¦complicated.
To be honest, I wasn't quite sure what to feel.

>I hadn't gotten in Harada's way, of course-there was no way I could haveâ€¦
But I felt bad.

>Someone who looked just like me had made things more difficult for the Shinsengumi. I didn't know who she was, but our shared appearance made me feelâ€¦responsible, somehow.
Who was this strange girl?

>Okita glanced at me.
"You worried about what Sano said?"

>"Oh! Umâ€¦yes, I am. I was wondering how someone could look just like me."
Maybe you got possessed."

>He smirked.
"Whenever you're sleeping, a restless spirit takes over your body, and you wander the streets of Kyoto, totally oblivious."

>"â€¦Do you really think that's what happened?"
Maybe he was right; maybe I was the culprit. I was puzzling that over in my head, when he burst into peals of laughter.

>"Ha ha ha! Oh manâ€¦ I'm just joking, kid. People don't really get possessed."
"Wh-What? You were kiddingâ€¦?"

>His laughter grew even louder, and I watched with flustered indignation as he wiped a tear from his eye.
"Oh manâ€¦ I'm sorry. Seriously, though. Just think about what Sano said for a minute. You remember that girl we met out on patrol with Heisuke? The one who looked just like you?"

>"Ohâ€¦"
Of course! The girl who Okita had said I bore a striking resemblance to. I'd almost forgotten about her.

>Her name was Kaoru.
"Do you think she was the one who kept Harada from capturing all the Tosa men?"

>"Well, I can't say for sure, but it seems a lot more likely than there being a third girl in Kyoto who looks just like you."
"Butâ€|she was just a normal girl. She didn't look like the kind of person who would try to sabotage the Shinengumiâ€|"

>"Haven't you ever heard you can't judge a book by it's cover? Maybe she just wanted you to think that. There's no way to know what she might be capable of. Besides, there isn't a person in Kyoto who doesn't know what the board represents."
There was no doubt in his voice.

>"Wh-What would you do if the girl was the same one who Harada saw?"
"Oh, you already know the answer to that, don't you?"
He smirked again.
"I'd kill her, of course. She might be a girl, but an enemy is an enemy."

He was right, I had known that he would choose to kill her, but to actually hear the cold finality of his wordsâ€|
"Umâ€| I-I need to go use the, um, facilitiesâ€|"
I just couldn't bear to stay in that room any longer.

â€|

>Were the girl we'd seen and the one who'd interrupted Harada one and the same?
If she was interfering with the Shinsengumi on purpose, did that mean that she was an imperialist? Or was she simply doing it for her own enjoyment?

>After all, there wasn't a person in Kyoto who didn't know the name of the Shinsengumi. She had to know what would happen to her if she challenged them.
"There you are. I'd wondered where you'd gone off to."

>I turned to find Hijikata standing behind me. I said nothing and looked back out at the stars. "Something wrong? The food not your thing?"
"No, no, it's wonderful! The food, I mean! It'sâ€|it's something else."

>"You're worried about the girl Harada saw."
"Erâ€|"

>There was no hiding my thoughts from him, it seemed.
"Don't worry about it, all right?"

>He gave me one of his rare kind smiles.
"Anybody messes with us, and I'll make sure they pay for it, one way or another."

>His words were as curt as always, of course, but I felt like I could sense a certainâ€|kindness beneath them.
In his own way, he seemed to care about my feelings.

>"â€|Of course. Thanks."
I could feel my tension begin to dissipate.

>Without a word, he moved over next to me and sat down.
I could feel a warm breeze drifting in through the open window...as well as Nagakura's voice.

>"All right, now it's time for the real party to start! You ready, Sano? We wanna see it!"
"Now you're talkin'!" came Heisuke's loud voice. "Can't have a party without Sano's unique performance!"

>"Well, I guess I don't have a choice then, do I?" came Harada's reply. "How could I say no to you guts anyway."
"What A guy!" said Nagakura excitedly. "Can you get us a brush and some ink, ma'am?"

>Their voices echoed out from the other room, drifting through the warm air.
The look on Hijikata's face was one I'd never seen before.

>"â€|Man. Takes me backâ€|"
"Umâ€|I'm sorry?"

>"We used to run this poor sword school back in Tama. We'd drink like this every night. This just reminds me of that."
He glanced at me

a moment before turning back to the stars.

>"There were a lot of men then who wanted to know how to swing a sword, in case we went to war or something, but not too many of 'em wanted to learn from a bunch of country hicks. We didn't have much in the way of money or students, butâ€¦ It was still fun."<p>

Hijikata's face as he spoke was warm and kind, not the sort of thing I would have expected from a commander whose men called him The Demon.

>"Hm? Something up?"
"Oh, umâ€¦ I was just surprised you used to, um, do thatâ€¦"

>"What do you mean?"
He smirked.

>"You think I've spent my whole life being a cold-hearted bastard, knocking around idiot kids in an attempt to get them into some sort of order?"
"Uh, um, Iâ€¦umâ€¦"

>I could hardly tell him that was exactly what I'd thought, so I sputtered and mumbled desperately.
Instead of the irritated frown I'd expected, his tranquil, warm expression, remained, and he went on almost as if I'd said nothing.

>"I still think about it, every so often. Wasn't so long ago I was just a street merchant selling my family's medicine. Now I wear swords and work for the shogun. Sometimes I wonder if this is just a long dream, and eventually I'm going to have to wake up."
By the time he finished, he seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me.

>The moon had risen outside our window and as he looked up, its light washed over his face, the cool glow playing across his handsome features.
Just like kimigiku had said, he was as good-looking as an actor.

>After her, though, a girl like myself had to seem awfully plain.
â€¦Especially next to a man as beautiful as he.

>"Gah! Oh, I can't take it! Stop it, Sano! I'm laughing so hard I can't breathe!" came Nagakura's voice.
"C'mon, you're the idiot who got me up here in the first place! Now you want me to stop right in the middle of it?" Harada sounded more amused than annoyed.

>"You're the greatest, Sano! One more time!" Heisuke's voice sounded hysterical.<p>

â€¦

>The party lasted until morning.
There was the Fury Corps to worry about, and now a girl who looked just like meâ€¦

>It was a lot to think about, but it was hard to feel down when everyone around me was having such a great time.<p>

It was near years end, and I was outside in the cold weather, sweeping the compound.

>"Phewâ€¦ Well, that should do it."
I wanted to help out as much as I could, but since they still refused to let me out without an escort, there wasn't a great deal I could do.

>Still, I had helped make our home clean, and that felt good. Hopefully they'd like it too.
"Cleaning, I see. You're certainly hard at work."

>"Oh, hello Kondou. It's really gotten cold lately, hasn't it?"
"Yes, it has indeed. I've been in Kyoto a while now, but I still can't get used to the weather."

>He rubbed his hands together and blew on them, in a mostly vain attempt to warm them up.
"I've picked up a bunch of dead leaves, so I was thinking about roasting potatoes later."

>I glanced at him.
"Would you like some? They'll warm you up."

>Kondou gave me a little, wry smile.
"Roasted potatoes, huh? I used to enjoy that. A long time agoâ€|"

>"Ohâ€|"
I flushed with embarrassment.

>Kondou was a busy man-management of the Shinsengumi was not easy. A man like that didn't have time for roasting potatoes.
"â€|You've been really busy lately. I hope you're taking care of yourself."

>"Hmm? Oh, rightâ€| Well, if I'm busy, then that means that the Shinsengumi is needed. it's an honor."
"Trueâ€|"

>In the last several weeks, Kondou and Hijikata had left the temple often to go meet with important shogunate officials.
They probably scarcely had time to breathe, let alone relax.

>At that moment, almost as if my thoughts had summoned him, Hijikata appeared.
"There you are, Kondou."

>"Oh, Toshi. Where were you? I was looking for you. They've chosen the next shogun. It's going to be Lord Yoshinobu Hitotsubashi."
Hijikata's brow furrowed to what I wouldn't have hesitated to describe as a glower.

>"Him, huh? Well, let's hope he lives up to the rumors."
Kondou frowned.

>"Must you find a dark side to everything?"
"Who's Lord Hitotsubashi."

>I had a vague memory that he was the commander of the shogunate forces during the Battle of Hamaguri Gate, but Kondou gave me a quick explanation of the rest.
"They say he is very intelligent; some every going as far as to call him the second coming of Lord Ieyasu."

>He glanced over at Hijikata, perhaps looking for corroboration.
He found none.

>"At any rate, he has a quick mind, and the emperor trusts him. How could he be a poor choice?"
There was a certain pride in Kondou's voice, almost as if he were talking about a friend or brother.

>If what he said was true, though, then perhaps the shogun would be able to unite the shogunate and the imperial court, and overcome the crisis that was destroying our nation.
"â€|All right, he's smart, I'll give him that." said Hijikata.

>"Then what's the problem."
"Forget it. Doesn't really matter who the shogun is to us anyway. We're just here to fight for him."

>Kondou nodded and smiled.
"That's right. If we do our best, that means the shogun and the shogunate are safe and secure."

>He kept his tone carefully light, perhaps in an attempt to sway Hijikata, but to no avail.
Only twenty days after Lord Yoshinobu had been officially inaugurated as the new shogun, the emperor passed away.

>It was especially hard on the emperor's younger sister, Kazunomiya, who had been married to Lord Iemochi and was intended to be a symbol of Imperial Unification, but everyone on both sides was shocked by his death.
He was succeeded by the Imperial Prince; a young boy of only 15 years.

>In the turmoil, the activities of the Choshu Domain went uninvestigatedâ€|
The entire country of Japan found itself thrust into rapid motion.

10. Chapter 3-1

YES! Finished two full chapters! WOOHOO! *ahem*

sweatdrop

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 3-1<p>

April 1867

The seasons changed, and spring came.

>Kyoto was filled with the cherry blossoms, and the whole city took on a festive atmosphere.
Surrounded by the gentle cheer of spring, my footsteps felt somehow lighter.

>Okita watched me prance about with a crooked smile.
"You don't need to hurry. We aren't going anywhere in particular. Just think of it as a nice relaxing walk."

>"â€|Okay. I'll be careful."
It seemed to me that it was dangerous for a captain of the Shinsengumi to think that when he was out on patrol, but I didn't dare say anything to Okita.

>Then again, things had been pretty quiet lately. Perhaps he was right.
No, I told myself, I had to focus. Now was not the time or the place for high spirits.

>Nearby I noticed a few ronin who slunk off into the side streets at the first glimpse of the Shinsengumi.
"How suspiciousâ€|"

>Why run away unless they knew they were guilty of something?
I stared after them intently and must have looked as if I was about to give chase because Okita gave a bark of laughter.

>"Don't waste your energy on them. They're small potatoes."
"Really?"

>"If they were Choshu guys, then they wouldn't just run off like that. They'd be more confident."
He glanced back in the direction of the cowardly ronin.

>"They guys who take off like that when we show up are almost always just small-time punks."
"I seeâ€|"

>I didn't.
"They're probably guilty of something; maybe some minor crime. But the blues scare off a lot of people these days."

>"The uniform's gotten pretty famous around Kyoto, hasn't it?"
He frowned.

>"Well, could be infamous, depending on who you ask."
It was true: The Shinsengumi blues brought recognition, but that was a double-edged sword. Sometimes they commanded obedience or respect, but sometimes the response wasâ€|less pleasant.

>Their uniform had become a symbol, but there was some argument among the Shinsengumi as to whether or not they should adopt a new uniform.
Some people, such as Itou, just felt that the uniform should be changed because it wasn't fashionableâ€|

>"Is Itou back from the imperial territories yet?"
Okita's eyes narrowed slightly.

>"Yeah, I think so. Can't say I'd have minded if he'd just stayed out there, though."
"He went to go recruit some of his friends and acquaintances, right?"

>He closed his eyes, seeming annoyed.
"That's what he says, but I gotta wonder how far he really went, you know?"

>"How far? What do you mean? If he went out past the imperial territories, then he must really care about the Shinsengumi, right?"
After all, to go that far would be quite a trip to make just to get more recruits.

>Okita, however, didn't seem to think so.
"That's what you think?"

>"â€|Am I wrong?"
"No, not really."

>Okita stopped and gazed off into space for a moment.
When he

spoke, it was to himself.

>"Kondou's too nice. He should just kill Itou."
"Okita!"

>He had a tendency to talk of killing too easily, and too lightly, butâ€|
"How could you joke about killing one of your companions?"

>He let his eyes slide to mine, and gave me a small sigh.
"A companion, huh?"

>The scorn in his voice wasn't for me; it was for Itou.
Ever since he had first arrived, Okita and the rest of the captains had never seemed to like Itou much, but I was surprised that he would say something like that where anyone could have heard.

>I glanced around, to make sure no one had been paying attention-
"What?"

>There, in the crowdâ€| A face I'd seen before.
Kaoru?!

>The face that looked back could easily have been mine. There was no way I could have ever mistaken that face.
But no sooner had I spotted her than she disappeared, melting into the crowd.

>"Kaoru!"
"Hey!"

>Okita made a grab from my arm, but I'd already moved out of his reach.
I might get in trouble for it, but if I didn't go quickly, I'd lose her.

>"Sorry Okita! There's something I have to do!"
I caught a glimpse of his confused face as I ducked into the crowd.

â€|

>"How many times do I have to tell her not to run off without permissionâ€| Why can't she look at this from my point of view?"<p>

...

>*Pant* *Pant* *Pant*
I ran through the crowd as fast as I could, bobbing and weaving around citizens going about their business, until at last I caught up to her.

>She was Kaoru, no mistake.
"Um, Kaoru? Do you remember meâ€|?"

>"Yes, you were with the Shinsengumi. I remember you."
She lookedâ€|surprised.

>"You ran after me so suddenlyâ€| It scared me."
"I'm sorry about that, but there's something I wanted to ask you."

>I realized belatedly that I didn't know what I planned to do with her answer once I had it, but I knew I had to ask.
"One of the Shinsengumi saw a girl who looked like me at the Sanjo Ohashi Bridge a while ago. Could that have beenâ€|you?"

>"I don't know. I do go by Sanjo Ohashi fairly often. Is that a problem?"
She laughed politely.

>"Ohâ€|"
"Did you want to ask if I'd even been there at night?"

>Could it be?
Could Kaoru really have been the girl who interrupted the Shinsengumi that night?

>"If it was an autumn night, and you got in the Shinsengumi's wayâ€|"
"Then you and I are gonna need to have a little talk. I don't want to give away all the details, but it ends with your death."

>"Oh! Okitaâ€|"
I hadn't realized he caught up with me so quickly.

>Kaoru glanced at him and smiled.
"Oh, you're Okita, from the Shinsengumi. Thank you for helping me the other day."

>She bowed, but Okita didn't even seem to notice.
"So, you gonna answer the question? Were you there that night?"

>Okita wore the save half-smile he always did, but his body was as tight as a bowstring, ready to have his blade in hand at a moment's notice.
"My deathâ€|? Please, don't say scary things like that."

>She paused, her expression blank.
"Lots of people pass by Sanjo Ohashi during the day."

>"At night, thoughâ€| I don't go near it, because of the notice board stuff."
It was almost as if she'd read my mind.

>"I can't believe you suspect me just because my face happens to look like someone else's. I don't know anythingâ€|"
I sighed and smiled.

>"Oh, of course! I understand!"
She looked so sad, I felt I had to say something.

>"I knew it wasn't you."
After all, how could a normal girl do anything to the men of the Shinsengumi?

>Okita seemed less convinced. His eyes shifted to me.
"And why do you say that? Because she's a girl? Or because she looks like you?"

>"No, that'sâ€|that's not itâ€|"
I couldn't bring myself to admit that he was exactly right.

>I'd assumed Kaoru couldn't possibly have done it, simply because she was girl.
"Can I go now? â€|Excuse me."

>"Kaoruâ€|"
She turned and ducked away, disappearing back into the crowd.

>Had I done the right thing, I wondered, in covering for her? I was pondering whether or not I should give chase again when I heard okita begin to cough.
"*Cough* *Cough* *Cough*"

>"Okita?! A-Are you okay?!"
He was bent nearly double, and coughing uncontrollably, his entire body shaking with each cough.

>"Okita?!"
"Stay back!"

>As I stepped toward him, he threw out a hand and twisted his face upward to glare at me.
"What?!"

>"*Cough* *Cough* I'm...I'm fine. So just...stay there, okay? *Cough* *Cough* *Cough*"<p>

It was the sheer force of his personality that stopped me, not just his words.

>"*Cough* *Cough* *Cough*"
After a while, his coughing slowed, then subsided entirely.

>"Okitaâ€| Is something wrong?"
"Like what?"

>When he turned to look at me this time, his sardonic half-smile was back. He looked every part the usual Okita, except that he had grown frighteningly pale.
"I meanâ€| Why don't we find somewhere to rest? You looked like you were in a lot of painâ€|"

>He grinned.
"Oh, I was just tired. I mean, you did make me run all the way here."

>"Butâ€|"
"No buts, I'm fine. Nowâ€|"

>His expression was suddenly hard.
"About the girl. Asking her about the thing with the notice board was important. I agree with you."

>Good, then. We needed to know if she was an enemy of the Shinsengumi or not. I needed to know.
"But even-no, because of how important that is, you shouldn't have run off on your own like that. What if she had been an enemy of ours. Could you have handled her?"

>"Wellâ€|"
"Did you even consider that possibility? That she'd planned to lure you here? It's a great spot for an ambush, you know."

>"â€|You're right."
She hadn't tried to attack me, but Okita was

right. Next time I might not be so lucky: I could have easily run right into a trap.

>"You need to be more careful, all right? I can take care of you, but without me around you're just a useless kid."
"â€|Sorry."

>The Shinsengumi had done so much for me, I'd just wanted to give something backâ€|
Instead, I'd only caused more trouble for them.

>"â€|All right, lecture's over."
Okita looked tired, and more than a little frustrated. I tried to apologize again, but he cut me off.

>"Stop being so timid. You can rely on us when you need to."
He smiled then.

>"I've gotten pretty used to saving your ass at this point. A couple more times isn't going to mean much."
He let out a snort of laughter.

â€|

>That night, after everyone else had gone to bed, I lay awake thinking about what had happened.
I couldn't forget what Okita had saidâ€|

>"A useless kidâ€|"
He was right.

>Compared to the captains-no, even compared to the weakest Shinsengumi footsoldier, I was pathetic.
There was nothing I could do for them. It wasn't as if I'd tried to imagine myself as some sort of warrior, but to have my lack of worth so bluntly stated was something of a blow.

>"*Sigh*"
I lay there, staring at the ceiling.

>I couldn't go on like this.
"Tomorrow I start working harder.

>I didn't want to run off on more pointless adventures that did nothing more than cause trouble.
That meant I needed to develop better judgement.

>"And if I'm going to do that, I need my sleep."
But no sooner had I closed my eyes-

>"What?!"
There was a crash from the hallway outside of my room. I rolled up and out of my bed just as the door exploded into my room.

>Standing in the hole was one of the Shinsengumi's soldiers.
"Umâ€| Is something wrong?"

It was dark, inside and out, and I couldn't see his face. He justâ€|stood there. I felt a chill run up my spine.

>"Did you need something?"
"Bloodâ€| I need bloodâ€|"

>"*Gasp*"
He was one of the furies!

>"Eh hehehehe! Give me blood!"
I could see now that his face was twisted in madness, and his eyes shone like twin fires in the night. His hair glistened white in the moonlight.

>He was a member of the Fury Corps, and he was utterly and completely mad.
"Uhâ€| Aaahâ€|"

>I had to call for help!
I couldn't possibly face a deranged superhuman monster on my own.

>â€|No, I couldn't call for help. if I did, then the secret of the furies would get out.
That would be bad for the Shinsengumi. I had to find another way.

>The fury, unfortunately, was not similarly encumbered by doubts.
"Aaah!"

>"Graaah!"
His sword hissed through the air, and I felt the metal of its blade burn into the flesh of my arm.

>"Gaaah!"
Blood sprang from the cut.

>I pressed down on it desperately with my free hand, but to no avail. Thick, red liquid spilled between my fingers, fled down my arm, and onto the floor.
"Yesssâ€|bloodâ€| Give me bloodâ€|"
>He began to creep toward me, his movements odd and jerky, like a massive spider.
I backed away from him until I felt my back hit the wall.
>I was going to die!
Suddenly, I remembered Okita's words from earlier that dayâ€|
>"Stop being so timid. You can rely on us when you need to."
That was it, then. My death wasn't worth their secret.
>"Someone! Help!"
"Eh hehehehe! Blood! Bloooooood!"
>He was down on his hands and knees, licking my spilt blood off the floor.
There was no samurai there. There wasn't even a person in him anymore.

The blood on the floor had distracted him, but I knew that would only last precious seconds. I help didn't arrive soon..
>The seconds went by like hours.
Please, I begged to any god who might be listening, let someone come!
>"Not enoughâ€|not enough!"
He looked up from the floor.
>My sleeve was soaked in blood from the cut on my arm. His eyes locked onto it, and I saw them light up with animal hunger.
His grin was a nightmarish thing.
>"Eh hehehehe! Yes! That! Give me more of your blood!"
"Nooo!"

>There was no doubt: He was going to kill me! I froze-
"Hey! You alive?!"
>"Yes!"
Hijikata had appeared in the doorway, his sword already drawn and shining in the moonlight.
>"Graah!"
The fury spun to attack Hijikata, but the commander's sword was faster.
>"Aaaarghh!"
His twisted cry reverberated from the walls of the room, but he still stood, despite the wound Hijikata had given him, sword in hand.
>"Get over here! Now!"
"Y-Yes!"
>As I ran to his side, I heard other footsteps, pounding down the hallway, and in mere moments they resolved into the figures of the other captains.
"Shit, this is bad," said Nagakura, his eyes wide. "I don't think he can even understand us."
>Harada nodded grimly.
"Yeah. He's too far gone. We can't let him live."
>At some unspoken signal, a chorus of blades slid from their scabbards.
"Shin! Sano! Don't screw this up!" joked Heisuke.

>Harada smirked and narrowed his eyes.
"Who the hell do you think we are, Heisuke?!"
>Nagakura scoffed.
"If the captains can't take out a simple soldier, even if he is a fury, he'd have to resign. Assuming he wasn't dead."
>They fanned out quickly, surrounding the wounded soldier.
There was no escape.
>The captains all attacked at once, and the fury died almost instantly.
The excitement was over.
>â€|Or so I'd thought.
But it hadn't been only the captains who'd heard my cry for help.
>"What's going on here?!"
Hijikata scowled.
>"Dammit!"
"What on Earth happened to that man?! Oh, this room has been stained with blood! How savage!"
>Itou's voice and his face where filled with shock and horror.
"Why have our captains cut down on of their own men?"

Explain this at once! What happened here?!"

>The captains fell silent.
"My apologies. My lack of discipline is at fault here."

>"Sanan?!"
His appearance surprised me, and likely everyone else.

>It seemed like it would have been more prudent for him to remain hiddenâ€¦
Needless to say, the appearance of a man he'd thought dead did little to improve Itou's disposition.

>"S-S-S-Sanan?! What are you doing here?!"
Itou's usual composure was almost entirely gone, and he gaped openly at Sanan.

>I couldn't really blame him. I probably would have done much the same thing if I saw a dead man walking and talking.
"I will explain later, but first we must clean up this mess."

>Sanan's face looked tight and drained. As the commander of the Fury Corps, he likely felt responsible for what had happened, as the man who had gone mad was supposed to have been under his control.
"It's not your fault, Sanan." said Nagakura.

>Heisuke nodded.
"It's just a side effect of the treatment, right? Nothing you could do."

>"Wh-What?! What are you saying?! 'Treatment'? What are they talking about, Sanan?"
"â€¦I'm afraid I cannot divulge that information."

>Sanan's gaze slid to Itou for a moment, but he said nothing further.
After all, what could he possibly say? How could one admit that they had been creating inhuman monsters in secret, out of one's own soldiers?

>Itou's composure regained at last, he leveled a glare at Sanan.
"I was told that Sanan had passed away, and with no reason to doubt that information I believed that was true. I see now that you have all conspired against me."

>He sighed and then narrowed his eyes.
"I am the Deputy Commander of the Shinsengumi! To do all ofâ€¦this without informing meâ€¦ I dearly hope you have a satisfactory explanation!"

>"If all you're gonna do is bitch, why don't you do us all a favor and shut up?" snapped Hijikata.
"What?! How dare you speak to me in such a manner! Hijikata, you-!"

>"Calm down now, Itouâ€¦"
Kondou glanced at Hijikata then back to Itou.

>"I'm sure Toshi didn't mean to snap. We're just all a little on edge right now. You have to understandâ€¦"
"Oh, I understand all right! I understand that you are savages, each and every one of you! I cannot abide the company of such uncivilized cretins any longer!"

>He glanced at Sanan and narrowed his eyes in anger.
"And as for you, Sanan, when you are finished here I expect to hear why you are not, in fact, deceased, and why this was hidden from me!"

>"Ughâ€¦"
"Are you listening to me, Sanan?!"

>"Unnnnnngghhâ€¦gaaaaagh!"
"Sanan?"

>Suddenly I realized he wasn't just being dismissive of Itou; there was something very wrong with him. His face was twisted in pain, and he didn't seem to respond at all, no matter how much I shouted his name.
Nagakura stared at him with wide eyes.

>"What's wrong, Sanan?"
"Sanan, uhâ€¦"

>"Chizuru, get back!" shouted Hijikata.
"Wha-?!"

>His hair had begun to turn white.
"Aaah!"

>By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. Sanan's hand shot out like an angry snake, and closed around my wrist.
"O-Owwâ€¦"

>The strength of his grip was unbelievable. His fingers might have been made of stone for all I could move them. I could almost feel the bones of my arm begin to bend under the strain.
"Owâ€|ughâ€| Sanan?!"

>"Bloodâ€|this bloodâ€|"
His finger pressed against my arm, too hard, wiping off some of the blood from the cut the soldier had given me.

>"Please, give me blood. Your bloodâ€|"
"Noooo! Let me go!"

>"Stop it, Sanan," snapped Harada.
Nagakura glanced around the room and then at my arm.

>"Dammit! The smell of blood's driving him crazy!"
"Let her go, Sanan," barked Heisuke.

>Each man still had his hand on his sword, but I could see the hesitation in their eyes. It was Hijikata who finally spoke.
"Hold him down! We're gonna have to get a little rough."

>Nagakura unsheathed his sword.
"Dammit! Guess we don't have a choice."

>"Sorry about this, Sanan," said Harada with a frown.
"I can't let you hurt Chizuru."

>They moved into a circle around Sanan, their blades glinting.
"Are you going to kill Sanan?! I can't allow you to do that!"

>"Itou, it's dangerous here. We should just leave this to Toshi and the guys. Come on."
"Kondou? What are you-?! Unhand me!"

>Kondou pulled a struggling Itou from the room and off down the hall.
"Good," said Harada, "Now we've just gotta take care of him."

>"It's not gonna be easy." said Nagakura.
"Sanan's always been pretty strong," said Heisuke, "And now he'sâ€|well, you know."

>"Eh hehehehâ€| Blood, yesâ€| My body, it needs the bloodâ€|"
His tongue flickered out to lick my blood from his fingers.

>This seemed to tip Heisuke's concern into full on rage.
"All right, that's enough! C'mon Shin! Sano! Let's go!"

>Harada nodded.
"We all attack together-!"

>"Wait!"
Nagakura stared at Hijikata like he was crazy.

>"What? We don't have all night, Hijikata."
"He'sâ€|he's doing somethingâ€|"

>"â€|Graaaaaghâ€|nnnggaaaah!"
"Sananâ€|? What's going on?"

>"Unnâ€|guhâ€| Whatâ€|what happened?"
The madness was gone from Sanan's eyes, and his hair was quickly fading back to its normal color.

>"â€|Sanan?"
"Yukimura? What am I doing hereâ€|?"

>"Oh, thank goodness! You're yourself again!"
I was relieved to see they hadn't been forced to cut Sanan down, butâ€| Why had he returned to normal?

>Harada clearly was wondering the same thing.
"What the hell just happened?"

>He glanced at Nagakura who just shrugged.
"Your guess is as good as mine."

>They both glanced at Hijikata.
"Hell if I know."

>The captains weren't the only ones confused: Sanan himself seemed to be just as surprised at his sudden transformation.
"I see. So I went mad, just like the othersâ€|"

>"â€|And then all of a sudden you were normal again. I just can't understand howâ€|"
"Howâ€|? Iâ€|I don't know."

>Hijikata placed a hand on Sanan's shoulder.
"We can figure that out later. First we need to clean up this room. Someone get rid of that body."

>Harada glanced down.
"That floor mat's gonna have to go."
>"And we're gonna have to replace this doorâ€|" said Nagakura.
Each of them moved to begin some task that needed doing and Hijikata turned toward me.
>"Youâ€|"
"Yes, of course. I'll help too-"
>He narrowed his eyes and frowned.
"You're hurt. What you need to do is rest."
>He closed his eyes.
"Since you obviously can't use your room, you can stay in mine for tonight."
>"Your room? Are you sure?"
He glanced at me and narrowed his eyes again.
>"Do I have a choice? Go!"
"Y-Yes!"
>I had no desire to remain in the blood-soaked room any longer than I had to. It took me only minutes to reach Hijikata's room.<p>

â€|
>"â€|Huh? Is it morning alreadyâ€|?"
The sun was peeking through the window, and outside I could hear twitters and chirps of birdsong.

>"Oh, rightâ€|"
The room I was in wasn't mine.
>It took me a moment to remember whose room it was, and then all the events of the previous night crowded back into my memory.
I saw, vividly, the man who'd gone mad with bloodlust; felt the sting as his sword bit into my arm-
>"I got cutâ€|"
I looked down at my arm.
>I'd wrapped it in bandages the night before, after insisting that I could handle it myself, being the daughter of a doctor.
Slowly, I lifted it, then moved it in a circle.
>The cut had bled a lot, but fortunately it hadn't been particularly deep.
"*Sigh*"
>I moved my arm some more.
It didn't hurt.
>"It bled so much, thoughâ€|"
With deliberate care, I unwrapped the bandages.
>"â€|Of course."
What had been an ugly, open wound the night before was now little more than a faint white line.
>In a few days, even that would be gone.
"Well, I guess it's good that the wound is gone, but if anyone sees thisâ€|"
>After some thought, I re-wrapped the bandages. Unless they took them off, no one would know that my arm was completely healed underneath.
That reminded me, howeverâ€| How were they doing?
>I was awake, so I figured I might as well go out to the common room and see if anyone was there.<p>

â€|
>As I neared the entrance, Itou appeared, on his way out. Heisuke and Saito followed in his wake, much to my confusion.
"Good morning."

>"Oh, it's you. Good morning. I'm glad to see you safe and sound."
"Um, thank you."
>His mood was almost the polar opposite of the previous night; he seemed now to be in rather high spirits.
"Has something happened?"

>"Oh ho ho ho! Would you like to know?"
"â€|Yes."
>"I won't tell you."<p>

"Ha hahaha! Well, you'll learn soon enough."
>he turned to the two captains with him.
"Isn't that right, Toudou? Saito?"
>"Whatâ€|?"
I cocked an eyebrow at Heisuke and Saito.
>The moment our eyes met, Heisuke looked away.
"â€|Yeah, I guess."

>That seemed odd.
"Umâ€| Saito?"
>"You have no need for this information just now."
Unlike his companion, Saito met my gaze straight-on, but his eyes were flat and utterly devoid of any emotion.
>Finally he looked away.
"We should go, Itou."
>Heisuke finally looked at me.
"Uh, yeahâ€| See ya, Chizuru."

>And then they were gone, leaving me wondering just what had happened.
"Are you sure it's all right for you to be up and about already?"
>Inoue and Shimada looked up as soon as I stepped into the common room.
"I'm fine. I slept really well, and I feel a lot better."

>"That's great. I'm sorry about what happened to you, though. Does your cut hurt?"
"Oh, uh, wellâ€| Actually, it wasn't very deep. It barely hurts at all."
>I couldn't tell him the truth, of course: that it was already almost completely healed.
"Oh, I ran into Itou on my way in. Did something happen?"
>"Ahâ€| So you saw them, eh?"
He frowned.
>"He said somethingâ€| weird. And Heisuke and Saito were acting kind of strange, too."
"Yeahâ€| Well, Itou and some others are leaving."
>"They're going to form a new group, different from the Shinsengumi."
"What?! Isâ€| is that okay?"
>"He had a meeting this morning with the chief and Commander Hijikata."<p>

â€|
>"â€| Guardians of the Imperial Tomb?"
"Yes. I intend to take some of my comrades and leave. We will be appointed official guardians of the Imperial Mausoleum. I have been considering such a move for some time now, but after last night'sâ€| excitementâ€| â€| I felt this was the right time. I knew when I joined the Shinsengumi that my imperialism might not be welcome, but I thought we could work past that. I see now that I was mistaken."
>Hijikata had glared at him.
"Just spit it out, Itou. You want to split up the Shinsengumi."
>"Call it what you like, but I can no longer remain in the company of such savages as yourself."
Kondou had frowned then, looking quite hurt.
>"If you insist, then I will do as you ask. you must remember, however that last night's incident is a result of orders from the shogunate. We cannot allow you to reveal this secret."
"Then I propose a deal: Allow me to depart peacefully, and in turn I will remain silent. I also wish to bring several of your men with me."

>Kondou had then looked away his frown deepening.
"â€| Very well, but anyone you wish to take must agree to leave."
>"Of course. I will, naturally, maintain the fiction that we intend to continue to cooperate with one another. A stance that will no doubt benefit both of us."
Itou then laughed.
>Kondou glanced at him, "â€| Cooperation. Fine." then at Hijikata, "Toshi? What do you think?"
Hijikata scoffed.
>"It's your decision, not mine."<p>

â€|
>"Thenâ€| Heisuke and Saitoâ€|"
"Yes. They are leaving with Itou. I confess, I'm rather surprised."

>"No" | "
>Then | would that mean I could never see them again?

>"Don't worry," said Kondou. "Remember what I said? We're going to keep relations amicable between our two organizations." | "
>Kondou | "

>It was kind of him to try to comfort me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was going to befall the Shinsengumi and its members. |
>Inoue turned to Kondou.

>"You aren't going to let the men interact with the Guard though, right?" |
>The expression on his face was likely a mirror of my own.

>He looked to Kondou but it was Hijikata who answered. |
>"Of course not. He gets to leave, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna let him get away with whatever he wants."

>"But | is this really okay? Itou and the others leaving, I mean." |
>Hijikata's expression softened for a moment.

>"Itou and his men leaving isn't a problem." |
>His voice was flat, but unconcerned.

>"Although, I was a little surprised that Heisuke and Saito decided to go with that snake." |
>He frowned.

>"Ah | I would say it was more than a 'little.'" |
>From there, the conversation moved onto a discussion of politics and the like that was beyond my ability to follow.

>And what could I have said anyway? The decision had already been made, and there was nothing I could have said to change it. |
>I got up quietly, and left the common room.

>"*Sigh* | I never thought something like this could happen | " |
>I was especially worried about the soldiers.

>What about the feelings of those who were being left behind? I wanted to know how the people in the Shinsengumi felt about Itou and his followers leaving. |
>The heads of the Shinsengumi seemed like the best people to ask, but they were all still talking in the common room.

>Perhaps I should wait a bit, until they were done- |
>Almost as if on cue, Hijikata appeared in the hallway.

>"Oh, hello Hijikata." |
>He glanced at me and stopped.

>"Shouldn't you be resting?" |
>"Oh, I...feel a lot better now."

>He frowned seeming unconvinced. |
>"Your dad's a doctor, and you know a little about medicine, but that doesn't mean you're invulnerable. Go back to your room and try not to run around too much."

>"Okay. I'll be careful." |
>It was easy to forget one had suffered a significant injury when it healed almost completely by morning.

>"I'll go right back to my room, but | Can I ask you something first?" |
>"What?"

>"It's about Itou, and the people who are leaving with him | How do you | feel about all of that?" |
>"What do you mean?"

>"Well, people who were members of the Shinsengumi | won't be." |
>"We were allies yesterday, but if our positions change we could be enemies tomorrow. That's life."

>No wonder they called him the Demon. His voice was cold, calculating, and utterly flat. |
>"But what about Saito? And Heisuke?"

>They had all been captains together. Surely, Hijikata saw them as friends, at least. |
>"Saito and Toudou | It's going to be rough to lose a pair of skilled swordsmen, yes. | But think about the future. If they're leaving, they had some problem with the Shinsengumi. Better they leave now, than before that problem gets worse."

How could he be so cold and analytical about his friends?
>On the other hand, his logic made sense. If Itou and company were leaving because they were incompatible with the Shinsengumi, then perhaps it was for the best.
But was the best thing for the future of the Shinsengumi also the best thing for Hijikata?
>I couldn't understandâ€|<p>

â€|
>My wound healed completely soon afterward, but I kept the bandages on. I got plenty of questions about how I was recovering, but the best I could do was not, smile, and assure them that I was fine.
The truth was, I didn't even have a scar. I couldn't have pointed out where on my arm I'd been cut if someone had asked me.

>When Itou and his followers-now the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb==left, the compound seemed suddenly very empty.
I felt like the Shinsengumi was falling apart around me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.
>Was this nothing more than a natural result of the Shinsengumi's growth, or the harbinger of something far greater and more terrible?<p>

11. Chapter 3-2

It's been a while so

Disclaimer: I own almost nothing and are therefore not claiming any of it as mine this is purely for entertaining the fans!

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 3-2<p>

July 1867

"I should go to sleep."
>â€|As if chiding myself would help.
My mind was wide awake. I wasn't falling asleep any time soon.
>But why? I was nervous, certainly, and I'd trained earlier that day, but neither of those was anything new.
I needed to get to sleep soon, or I'd oversleep in the morning, and that would be embarrassing.
>As I forced my eyes shut for the thousandth time, I heard the door to my room slide open.
"Are you awake?"
>"Y-Yes!"
The voice outside belonged to Hijikata. I scrambled to my feet.
>"What is it?"
"You have a visitor."
>A visitorâ€|? Who would come to visit me?
"You'll see. Hurry up."
>"R-Right!"<p>

â€|
>I shuffled down the hallway after him, and burst into the common room.
Kondou, Okita, Harada, Nagakuraâ€| All of the top men in the Shinsengumi were there, and so was someone elseâ€|
>"Hello, Chizuru! How are you doing?"
"Sen?!"
>My visitor was Sen?!
We'd met in Kyoto proper some time ago. She was near my age, but had a unique and overwhelming personality, which

had allowed her to see right through my disguise.

>But why had she come to the Shinsengumi?
Only then did I notice a beautiful woman dressed as a ninja seated next to Sen.

>Sen noticed me look at her.
"Oh, yes. She is with me. My bodyguard, one might say."

>Bodyguard? That answered nothing, and only prompted more questions.
The captains kept silent, content to simply observe our conversation. Whatever was about to transpire, it seemed they intended to leave the decision to me.

>"So, um, Sen? Why are you here?"
She smiled.

>"I've come to take you."
That had not been on the short list I'd begun to compile of reasons Sen had sought my company in the middle of the night. A quick glance around the room revealed that it had not been on anyone else's either.

>"Um? Pardon? I don't understand what you're saying"
"No, what you don't understand is the situation. But you needn't worry. You do trust me, don't you?"

>I certainly didn't suspect her of anything untoward, but
"There's no time. We must make preparations to leave immediately."

>Silent until that moment, the woman at Sen's elbow finally spoke.
"Wait, wait, hold on. Why should I go with you?"

>"Yeah, that's a damn good question!" snapped Nagakura. "You just barge in here, ask to see her, and spring this on us!"
He narrowed his eyes.

>"I think it's about time you told us what the hell's going on here!"
"Please, Sen."

>I didn't let my gaze waver from her eyes.
"Yes, I do suppose you have a point. Very well. I shall start at the beginning."

>She cast her gaze around the room; this explanation was not simply for my benefit.
"You are familiar with Kazama, yes? I hear you have crossed swords with him once or twice."

>Hijikata narrowed his eyes at her.
"How'd you know that?"

>Sen frowned.
"Oh, ah, well, I hear of most things that happen in Kyoto. Eventually."

>The Commander smiled.
"Hnn. You're something like Kazama and his punks, aren't you?"

>Sen furrowed her brows in irritation.
"I would rather prefer not to be associated with his ilk, but yes, in a sense you are correct."

>His smile vanished.
"Fine. You were talking about Kazama."

>"He showed up at Ikedaya, Hamaguri, and Nijo," explained Harada.

"He's got something to do with Satsuma and Choshu, doesn't he?"
Okita folded his arms.

>"Well, most of the time it seemed more like he was there for his own reasons, not any kind of domain politics."
Hijikata sighed.

>"Either way, he's an enemy of the Shinsengumi."
"Then you are also aware that he is pursuing your lady friend here?"

>Sen gestured at me for the captains' benefit, then fixed me with a level stare.
What was going on? This was getting stranger and stranger, and I was starting to think I didn't really want to know the rest of the story.

>After quietly listening, Kondou finally spoke.
"We are aware of that. We are also aware that Kazama and his compatriots call themselves demons-not that we're inclined to believe such a claim, of course."

>Sanan glanced at him.
"Regardless, we must consider it. They have demonstrated several times that they have strength and skill beyond

any human."

>Okita, of course, laughed.
"Ha! Heh hehâ€| Guess you'd know, huh Sanan?"

The room grew slightly more uncomfortable.

>I didn't think Okita had meant to offend with his remarks, butâ€|
"So, um, go on Senâ€|"

>"Ah, then you know they are demons. Excellent. That will save me some time, then. I am not a human either. I am also a demon."
A demon?!

>Sen was a demon?!
I am, in fact, a princess. Princess Sen."

>With that, she gave us an elegant bow, exactly like what one might expect from a princess.
"I come from a family of ninja who have served Princess Sen and her family for generations."

>Hijikata smirked.
"I'd wondered why you were being so friendly. You were gathering information on the Shinsengumi."

>"I have no idea what you mean."
She tilted her head to the side politely, and met Hijikata's glare with an innocent smile.

>Nagakura's eye went wide.
"You know her?!"

>Harada rolled his eyes.
"Move your eyes up about six inches, Shinpachi. That's Kimigiku. She's, uh, dressed a little different from when we met her at Shimabara, but that's her face all right."

>"What?!"
Nagakura nearly fell over in shock.

>After recovering, he made a great show of staring pointedly at Kimigiku's face. For his effort, he received a smile identical to the one Hijikata had received.
"We demons have lived in this country sinceâ€| Well, since a very long time ago. The top officials in the shogunate, and in many of the domains, already know of us."

>It was still something of a shock, but after meeting Kazama and his companions, it was somewhat easier to accept Sen's explanation as the truth.
Most demons had no interest in human matters, and preferred to be left alone, to go about their own affairs in peace. However, humans in positions of power saw that they might achieve great things with the assistance of demons, and so demanded that assistance."

>"Andâ€|did the demons obey?"
"Many did not. They felt they had no obligation to involve themselves in human affairs. Human ambition meant nothing to them. But when they refused, the human lords were furious. They sent out great armies to destroy the villages of the demons."

>"How horribleâ€|"
"The demon clans scattered across the country and were, perforce, sent into hiding."

>"No longer isolated in their own communities, demons began to mate with humans. These days, there are few demons who can a pure bloodline."
"And I assume Kazama is one of these?" asked Kondou.

>Sen nodded.
"Currently, the largest pureblood family in the west is the Kazama, who have the support of the Satsuma Domain. The head of that family you have already met: Chikage Kazama."

>"Chikage Kazamaâ€|"
"In the east, the largest family is the Yukimura."

>"What?!"
"I had heard the Yukimura family had been destroyed, but it would seem there is a survivor. That survivor is her."

>She turned her eyes to me.
"Chizuru, the blood that runs in your veins is pure and strong. I sense great power from you."

>"No wayâ€|Iâ€|butâ€|"
"No, you are very much a demon. I apologize, but there it is."

>The finality of her words brought a cold silence to the room.
I had no desire to believe her story, but the more I thought back to events that had seemed utterly nonsensical, the more it made sense.

>Now I knew why Kazama was after me, and why I'd always healed so much more quickly than anyone else.
Sen turned back to the others.

>"If Chizuru is indeed the descendant of a pureblooded demon, then Kazama's desire for her is clear. Should two purebloods mate, they will produce an even more powerful demon."
Kondou glanced at me and frowned before returning his attention to Sen.

>"Ahâ€¦ So he wants her for his bride."
"After a fashion, yes. Kazama will definitely return for her. Thus far he has been content to toy with you, but I cannot guess how much longer that may last. Should he devote all of his formidable abilities to this task, I do not think you will be able to protect her. Even the Shinsengumi cannot stand against the true power of a demon."

>Nagakura was clearly offended.
"Whoa there, Princess. You don't think that's going a bit far?"

>Harada agreed with him.
"Shinpachi's right. You aren't givin' us enough credit."

>Sen's expression softened.
"The only reason you are still alive is because Kazama and his companions have not turned their full strength on you."

>Sanan gave a snide smile.
"Then let them. I should dearly like to see the power of a true demon."

>"Sanan!"
Kazama and his friends had already demonstrated incredible strength: Even the captains of the Shinsengumi had been easily brushed that was not even the full extent of their strength, then a battle to the death against one of them would beâ€¦

>Hijikata had been quiet for the most part but now he spoke.
"Let me be clear, lady. We're the Shinsengumi. The Wolves of Mibu. We're not going to piss ourselves over a demon or two."

>Okita nodded.
"Very true. Besides, we've got the Demon himself in command, don't we?"

>Hijikata rolled his eyes.
"Always have to have the last word, don't you?"

>Sen gave the Commander an apologetic look.
"I understand how you feel, butâ€¦ You must realize that these men are unlike any other foe you have faced before. That is why I must ask you to leave Chizuru to us. In our car, her chances of survival will be much higher."

>Nagakura narrowed his eyes at her, clearly fed up.
"Hey, give us a chance all right? Are you trying to say we can't protect her?"

>"Besides, what do you mean 'chances'?" said Harada, his expression only slightly friendlier than his friend's. "If you can't guarantee her safety, I don't see why we should hand her over to you."
Okita stared at Sen for a moment.

>"Look, lady, you're not part of the Shinsengumi, so I'd appreciate it if you could keep your nose out of our business, all right?"
They had made it quite clear that they weren't interested in Sen's offer. Perhaps they'd been a little harsh, but I couldn't deny the warm feeling of being part of a family who was unwilling to let me go.

>Kimigiku glanced at the Commander.
"What about you, Hijikata? You've acknowledged Kazama's strength. Surely you must at least consider the Princess's offer. Please, give Chizuru to us."

>His eyes narrowed in irritation.
"That's different."

>Kimigiku's smile froze.
"I don't know how strong our enemy really is, but that doesn't change the fact that we'll protect her, in the name of the Shinsengumi."

>He turned to Sen.
"Besides, you're a demon, too. Why should we trust you?"

>Kimigiku furrowed her brows in anger.
"Do you know who you're speaking to? Princess Sen is a descendant of Suzuka Gozen-"

>"Kimigiku, please. That is not necessary."
Her tone was calm and friendly, but it left no room for argument.

>"I agree with Hijikata," said Sanan. "She should stay here, with the Shinsengumi."
Kimigiku glared at him, but said nothing.

>Sen frowned.
"I see. This is a problem, then. There is no way I can convince you?"

>Kondou had remained silent for most of the discussion, his arms folded in thought, but at last he spoke.
"â€|Yukimura. What do you have to say about this?"

>"Me? Umâ€| Well, Iâ€|uhâ€|"
He smiled.

>"I see. It must be difficult to discuss with an audience. You ought to speak with Princess Sen, alone."
Hijikata's eyes went wide at these words.

>"What the hell, Kondou!"
He wasn't the only one to object; most of the room rose up in protest.

>Sanan frowned.
"There should be at least one witness. The princess may take Kimigiku as well, of course."

>Kondou shook his head.
"No, that's not necessary."

>He swept his gaze across the room.
"Yukimura has shown herself to be reasonable. I've no doubt she won't do anything foolish."

>He gave me a sweet smile.
"Am I correct, Yukimura?"

>"Of course. I would never betray you. Any of you."
Okita gave a sheepish smile.

>"Well, if Kondou says soâ€|"
His words spoke for the rest of them as well.

>They might not like it, but Kondou was the chief. What he said, went.
Sanan, however was a bit more reluctant to agree.

>"You won't steal her away the moment the two of you are alone, will you?"
Sen smiled at him.

>"You needn't worry. I am not like Kazama."
I turned to Sanan as well.

>"I'll be fine. Sen isn't a bad person."
"Why thank you, Chizuru."

>She smiled.<p>

â€|

>A few moments later, we found ourselves alone in my room.
"I know I've given you a terrible amount of things to think on this evening, and I'm awfully sorry."

>Now that we were alone, she was less formal: This was the Sen I had met in Kyoto, all those months ago.
"No, it's all right. â€|I'm sorry about, you know, them. They said some pretty mean things."

>"Well, that's to be expected I fear. I was asking rather a lot of them, and frightfully suddenly. Not many humans would accept the existence of demons so readily. But enough of that! On to business. What do you say to my offer? Have you thought on it?"
I had indeed.

>If Sen had come to me when I'd first arrived in Kyoto, I might well have taken her up on her hospitality.
But nowâ€|

>She frowned when I didn't answer right away.
"The Shinsengumi

seems to believe that it can protect you. Though I do not doubt their dedication, I confess I do doubt their ability."

Perhaps what she said was true.

>To stand against demons would be no mean feat.
The Shinsengumi was powerful, and skilled. I'd seen them face overwhelming odds and emerge victorious, but always those odds had been only human.

>The strength of even a single demon was something great and terrible; of that, there was no doubt. We had all seen so firsthand, and some had even lost their lives to that strength.
Even the captains had nearly fallen before them.

>I glanced up at Sen who was smiling warmly at me.
"Will you come with us, then? It is dangerous for you to remain with the Shinsengumi."

>"Senâ€|"
Her eyes were serious, but warm and honest. Whatever else she might be, her concern for me was real.

>"Thank you, Sen, butâ€|"
I hesitated.

>"Is there a reason you wish to stay?"
"â€|Yeah."

>"Oh myâ€| One of those gentlemen, perhaps?"
"Wh-What?!"

>Her question had been entirely innocent, although it had caught me off-guard. I couldn't possibly lie to herâ€|
"Yeah."

>I nodded, and did my best to look confident.
"â€|I see."

>She smiled.
"Well, I shan't ask who, but I can certainly understand your dilemma. That being the case, I couldn't possibly tell you to leave."

â€|

>"Thank you for waiting."
The common room was just as we'd left it, and every head swiveled to look at Sen and me as we stepped back in.

>It didn't look as though they'd tried to kill each other in our absence, which was something of a relief.
Kondou was the first to speak.

>"Have you reached a decision?"
Before I could speak, Sen stepped forward.

>"After some discussion, we have decided to leave things as they are."
"Senâ€|"

>She bowed deeply to the captains.
Kimigiku gave her charge a hesitant look.

>"Are you sure, Your Highness?"
"Quite. For now, I believe it is of utmost importance to prioritize Chizuru's desire."

>"Very well," said Kondou, giving them both a kind smile. "The Shinsengumi accepts responsibility for her well-being."
No sooner were the words out of his mouth than all the captains rushed toward me.

>"Just relax and leave it all to me!" said Nagakura happily.
Harada rolled his eyes but smiled.

>"Oh, I'm sure Shinpachi'll give you all sorts of other things to worry about. Still, glad to have you around."
Okita folded his arms and smirked at me.

>"What kind of girl would want to stay here?"
Hijikata gave a kind smile of his own.

>"This doesn't make you some kind of special guest. You get the same treatment you always have."
"Right. Thank you, all of you, for letting me stay!"

>Sen took my hands in hers, and let her eyes rest on mine.
"Do be careful. And remember, I am on your side."

>"Thank you, Sen."
She gave me one last warm smile, and then Sen and Kimigiku were gone.

â€|

>"*Sigh*"
Once again, sleep refused to come.
>My mind worked furiously, turning over everything Sen had told me; examining it from every angle.
I was a demon.
>Not only that, but I was the head of a pureblooded demon clan that had been nearly destroyed, and my heritage was the reason Kazama had developed such an interest in me.
"Goshâ€|"
>I had decided to stay with the Shinsengumi, but was that really the best idea? Should I have left instead?
I'd wanted to stay, of course, and I didn't really think leaving was a reasonable choice, butâ€|
>What if I'd made a mistake?<p>

It wasn't an easy question to answer.

>The relentless flow of thought had at last begun to subside when I heard noise erupt from outside.
Roars and shouts of battle, accompanied by the sound of steel against steel echoed through the night.

>"I'm sorry for bothering you so late, but this is an emergency!"
There was someone just outside my doorâ€|Shimada?

>"Y-Yes?!"
The word was barely out of my mouth when the door snapped open and Shimada stepped into my room. His eyes darted back and forth nervously, and his body was tense.

>"Has something happened?"
He nodded.

>"The demons have attacked us. Here."
"What?!"

>I leapt for the door, but he threw out an arm to stop me, and his eyes met mine.
"They're after you, which means you need to stay here."

>"B-But-!"
I was the reason they'd come here! How could I justify sitting on my hands while others fought my battles for me? I didn't know what to doâ€|

>"I have to go, Shimada."
"I can't let you do that!"

>I gave him a level stare.
"Those demons are here for me. If anyone gets hurtâ€| Maybe they'll listen to me. That's why they're here, right? What if I can convince them to leave peacefully?"

>He still wouldn't budge.
"Please, I'm begging you! Let me go!"

>Shimada's brow furrowed, and his mouth drew into a tight line, but at last he sighed and shook his head.
"Fine. I was told to protect you though, so if you're going then so am I."

â€|

>We ran out of the house and then I paused momentarily, unsure of where to go.
"This wa-Grraagh!"

>One moment Shimada was there, and the next he wasn't.
He flew several yards through the air, then landed hard on the ground, slid another few feet and lay still.

>"Shimada?!"
I froze.

>"Just where do you think you're going?"
That cold, flat voiceâ€| Chikage Kazama?!

>In the same instant that I recognized his voice, I felt his arm snake around my neck, pulling me toward him.
"Urgh!"

>I struggled, but his grip was as immovable as steel.
"Let me go!"

>"Hmph. What sort of business do you have with false demons, hmm?"
His voice was like a cold breath in my ear, and I could almost hear a sneer in his tone.

>"No matter how much you give to these humans, they will betray you. You've seen those abominations they've created, haven't you? What

could you possibly hope to gain from them?"
"Iâ€|"
>I was at a loss for words.
The creation of the furies was hardly something I approved of, but I wasn't part of the Shinsengumi. What right did I have to criticize their actions?
>Especially when the very concoction that allowed them to create their "false demons" had been created by my father.
"Breaking into out headquarters, huh? Takes balls, but that fun's over now, pal."

>"Hey! Let her go!"
Tears nearly sprung to my eyes.
>"Hijikata! Harada!"
Behind them, I could see Yamazaki and several of the other Shinsengumi soldiers.
>Some men were missing, thoughâ€| Had they been injured by the demons? Perhaps evenâ€|killed?
Kazama sneered at them all.
>"You fools have no idea of her worth. She is most valuable when used by a fitting partner."
Harada appeared disgusted.
>"If you're that into her, then just bring her flowers and stuff, like a normal guy. This stuff is just creepy."
The Shinsengumi had surrounded Kazama by now, but his grip on me hadn't wavered for even a moment.
>"She's worthless to you as a hostage." said Hijikata.
Kazama smirked at him.
>"I have no intention of using her as such. She is my goal here, not a hostage. The rest of you are simply obstacles."
The ring of men around him began to draw in. I could feel the tension build, like a rope being pulled taut. Soon it would reach its breaking point. What was I going to do?
>Kazama had a good hole on me from behind, but he hadn't bothered to restrain my arms. Perhaps he'd simply thought that there was nothing I could do, or that I wouldn't dare to attack him.
â€|Or perhaps he thought that even if I did, he'd have no difficulty dealing with my attacks.
>I wasn't foolish enough to think I might actually beat him in a fight, but at least I could try and defend myself! I'd let the Shinsengumi deal with my problems on their own long enough!
"Yah!"

>I jerked my kodachi out of its scabbard and swung it at him.
Before it could even reach him, Kazama's hand shot out to grab my sword arm, stopping me as surely as if I'd hit a wall.

>"Hnng!"
His hand slid to my wrist, and he twisted viciously.

>It was strong enough that I thought for a moment my bones would break. With a cry, my sword flew from my fingers.
"Pointless. You thought you'd actually hit me?"
>"No, but I will!"
"What?!"
>My aborted attack had distracted Kazama for only a split second, but that was all the time Hijikata needed.
Within the space of a breath, he closed the distance between himself and my captor, the tip of his blade leaping toward Kazama's throat.
>Dammit!"
Almost too quickly to see, he leaned out of the way, Hijikata's blade hissed through the air centimeters from his neck.

>A lesser man-a human-would have been dead, and so for a moment Kazama's demon strength and reflexes were focused on the sword at his throat. That moment was enough time for me to break free.
"Ah!"

>I felt a gentle, powerful arm curl around my body, catching and sheltering me at the same time.
"Hijikataâ€|?"
>"Thought you were supposed to stay in your room. You're a real pain, kid."
"I know, I'm sorryâ€|"

>He never looked away from Kazama as he spoke but his next words held a hint of relief.
"Still, you did good."

>"â€|What?"
"Wouldn'ta had that opening without you. Good job."

>Praise from Hijikata wasâ€|not something I was accustomed to. I opened my mouth to sayâ€|I wasn't sure what, when-
"The girl is mine. I will not give her to a mere human."

>Kazama had recovered quickly from the attack, and his eyes smoldered with cold fury.
"Sorry, but I can't give her to you. The Shinsengumi's responsible for her now. We gave our word. No going back."

>I felt his grip on me tighten as he spoke.
"Chizuru. You know you're a demon, yes? Then come. Join me."

>"No! I'll never join you! I'm staying here! Now pleaseâ€|please leave!"
A look of annoyance gleamed over his features.

>"â€|You would choose a simple human, then?"
"Ha! Aww, too bad, Kazama. Looks like you got dumped."

>I hadn't even noticed Shiranui appear, but behind him I could see the Fury Corps, ready for battle.
At their head was Sanan.

>"He he heâ€| There you are. The Fury Corps will be your opponent."
"This is an excellent chance for you to witness our tremendous strength."

>"â€|These men are fresh, ready to fight. What would you do?"
Amagiri, too, had betrayed no hint of his presence until he simply appeared.

>"So? They could have a whole army of these chumps, and they wouldn't be a match for us. I say we take 'em apart."
His tongue flickered over his lips, and his grin was almost hungry.

>"Ah hahahaha! Yes, do! Show us just how 'superior' you are!"
"This is a farce. We retreat."

>With no further deliberation, they leapt over the wall to the street and were gone.
The Shinsengumi did not pursue them.

>My body sagged with relief as the terrified energy of the last few minutes quickly ebbed away.
"All right. Won't see them again tonight."

>The warmth of his arm lingered for a few moments after he'd let go of me.
"Umâ€|Hijikata? Thank youâ€|"

>"Hey! What's the status of the injured?!"
"Ohâ€|"

>The moment he'd let go, he'd turned away to deal with his men. He hadn't even heard me.
His face was cold and hard; the face of the Demon of the Shinsengumi.

>As the last of his warmth left me, I shivered in the cold night air.<p>

â€|

>It seemed like morning came altogether too early.
I sighed, splashed my face with cold water to clear my wits, and headed for the common room.

>The captains and several other men were already there, including Inoue and Yamazaki.
"Good morning."

>They nodded or mumbled return greetings, but their faces were universally dour after the night's events.
I heard Inoue and Yamazaki mention Shimada's name, and edged over to listen in on their conversation.

>"How is he doing?" asked Inoue.
"The hit knocked him out," explained Yamazaki, "but aside from some bruises he seems to be fine. He'll be back on duty soon."

>I sighed with relief, and felt some of the tension leave my neck. If Shimada had been seriously hurt guarding meâ€|
"Oh, Chizuru."

Shimada wanted to apologize to you for not doing a better job."

>"What?! I'm the one who should be apologizing to him!"
I felt the conversation in the room ebb, and turned to see Kondou walk through the door.

>he was usually calm and collected, but today his face was especially stern. Something was wrongâ€|but what?
"Uh oh. What's happened? You've got a scary enough face to begin with, Kondou. now you're just terrifying."

>Inoue glanced at me.
"Look, you're even scaring her."

>"N-No, I'm not scared!"
I waved my hands desperately, and the men laughed.

>Kondou turned to me, thought his expression remained unchanged.
"Sorry about that."

>He gave me a tight grin, but then looked down, his face grim.
"Please, just tell us what happened. Is it bad?"

>"Well, you'll find out soon enough, I suppose."
He wasn't just talking to me any more. The rest of the men moved closer to hear what he had to say.

>"Nishi Hongwanji doesn't want the Shinsengumi here any more."
Yamazaki frowned.

>"They're telling us to leave, you mean."
Kondou turned to him.

>"Well, they didn't say that in so many words, butâ€|yes."
"I had a feeling this day would come eventually," said Inoue, "but now that it's hereâ€| What should we do?"

>The monks at the Nishi Hongwanji temple were imperialists, and allies of the Choshu. They'd never been fond of the Shinsengumi, but we'd decided to force our way into their temple anyway.
It was no surprise they wanted us out, but I'd finally begun to feel like the temple was my homeâ€| On a more practical level as well it was far more convenient for our work in Kyoto.

>I was sure I wasn't the only one who felt that way.
"Still, this is awfully sudden," stated Yamazaki. "Do you think last night's incident triggered this?"

>Kondou sighed.
"I don't have to think; I know. They don't want fighting on the temple grounds. I'm sure someone else has a hand in this too. The Choshu, maybe, or Satsuma."

>The fight the night before had only happened because of me.
"I'm sorryâ€| This is all my fault."

>Kondou gave me a sad smile.
"Not true. We came to this temple and forced them to yield to our admittedly unreasonable demands."

>Yamazaki grimaced.
"But what are we going to do? If we have to move, then we need to start looking for a new location."

>"Actually, we don't. We'll be provided with a new site, courtesy of the Nishi Hongwanji temple."
At this Inoue smiled.

>"That's awfully generous. They must really want us gone."
Kondou frowned, clearly not finding it amusing.

>"Yes on both counts, which is why I decided to accept their offer. Things are going to get busy around here soon."<p>

â€|

>A plot of land was purchased and a new compound built, all paid for by the Nishi Hongwanji temple. It became the third headquarters of the Shinsengumi: the Fudodo Village location.
By the time summer came, the Shinsengumi had left Nishi Hongwanji, where they'd spent more than two years.

12. Chapter 3-3

We're almost there...

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 3-3<p>

November 1867

A gust of wind stripped some of the last, stubborn leaves from the trees, and sent them skittering across the Kyoto street.

>It was cold, and bit into me through my clothes. I

shivered.
"â€|It's almost winter, isn't it?"

>"Yeah," said Harada. "The wind's gotten pretty cold lately. Still, we don't have it too bad during the day. I can't imagine how cold it gets for the night guysâ€|"
It was November, and the temperature was definitely dropping, although it had yet to get cold enough to see our breath during patrol.

>"Haaahâ€|"
Harada smiled at me.

>"Are your hands cold? â€|Would you like me to hold them?"
I smirked at him.

>"I'm not that cold! I'll be fine! â€|Oh?"
I'd noticed someone walking toward usâ€|

>"Hey, Chizuru. Sano, what do you think you're doing? You're supposed to be working, not screwing off and hitting on poor, defenseless girls on the street."
Harada scowled at him.

>"Hey, not everybody's a gigolo like you. She looked cold. I'm just trying to be a gentleman."
"Ohâ€| He heâ€| Hello, Nagakura."

>Nagakura's patrol took him on a different route than others: It was only luck that we'd happened to meet in one of the few places they overlapped.
Their bickering might have looked odd to a passerby, but I knew it for a sign of deep friendship that it was.

>"Hm? What's up? Why're you grinning like thatâ€|?"
Harada laughed.

>"Probably thinks your face is funny, Shinpachi. You really oughta do something about that thing."
"No!" I snapped. "It's justâ€|umâ€| Well, I was just remembering when we met up like this beforeâ€| Like the time I met Kaoruâ€| I was with Okita and Heisuke then, though-"

>I stopped.
"Ohâ€|"

>More than six months had passed since Saito and Heisuke had left to join the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb. Harada and Shinpachi's faces turned grim as I trailed off.
I shook my head, hoping vainly cast off unpleasant thoughts.

>"I just mean there's been so much going on latelyâ€| It make me nostalgicâ€|"
"The Shinsengumi has changedâ€| Hell, so has the rest of the world."

>"Yesâ€| Like the shogunate handing power over to the Imperial Court."
Nagakura nodded as I spoke, with the air of a pleased teacher encouraging a student.

>"Yes, yes, very good. Now, do you know how the loss of Itou and his followers affected the Shinsengumi?"
"Umâ€| Well, we have fewer member nowâ€|"

>"You're half right. True, we have lost some of our men. Those who were staunch imperialists were the first to leave."
Harada nodded and glanced at me.

>"That meant that most of the guys who stayed were loyalists. Not all

of them, thoughâ€¦"
"Yeah," said Nagakura. "You remember when Kondou got promoted into direct service to the shogun, and we all became shogunate vassals? Not everybody was happy about that."

"That was right around the time we moved to Fudodo Villageâ€¦"
Several more men had wanted to leave. Some of them had been given permission to go, but others were told that wasn't an option and were forced into the Fury Corps.

Kondou's promotion had changed the Shinsengumi's relationship with the shogun. Where before, we'd only been philosophically aligned with the shogun, now we answered directly to him.
For some people, that had been a serious problem.

"How do you guys feel about being vassals of the shogun?"
Harada arched a brow and gave an unsure smile.

"â€¦I'm not really a fan."
Nagakura seemed annoyed.

"Yeah, I didn't do all this work just so I could be a retainer for the shogun."
Neither of them was very happy with it, then-Nagakura especially.

We kept walking for a few blocks, talking about this and that, before Harada yawned quietly.
"Your droning is putting me to sleep, Shinpachi. You can tell him to shut up too, if he's boring you, you know."

I smiled and laughed.
"Oh, no, I'm fine. I like listening to Nagakura talk about things."

"You see, Sano? She's a good girl. Unlike you. Now, shall we continue?"
He turned back to me as we continued forward.

"What do you know about the Meiji Emperor's ascension two months ago, and the Restoration of Imperial Rule last month?"
"Well, the Restoration was when the Tokugawa shogunate returned power over the government to the emperorâ€¦right? I don't really know much about itâ€¦"

He grinned.
"Well, you know enough; that's pretty much it. A man named Ryoma Sakamoto, from the Tosa Domain, was the one who figured out a way for the emperor to regain power without destroying the shogunate."

Unfortunately, Nagakura continued, in doing so he managed to anger both the loyalist and imperialist factions, and earned enmity of both.
"At any rate, the Restoration means that Tokugawa has lost all real authority. â€¦At least, that's the official story."

"In reality, he's keeping a lot of his power," said Harada, "the government just can't function without someone to hold the reins. The Satsuma are up to something too, but we don't know what. Still, the world's not going to change overnight."
"I seeâ€¦"

As I looked around the city, it seemed like he had a point.
Nothing much seemed to have changedâ€¦ Inns were still bustling with travelers; tea shops were still smelling deliciousâ€¦

Life continued just as it always had, regardless of what the shogun was or wasn't doing.
"Hmmâ€¦"

The city might look the same as it always had, but time flowed on, regardless, and a great wave was coming that would carry all of us away.
I looked up at Nagakura, and something occurred to me that I hadn't thought of before. Before I realized what I was doing, I'd already opened my mouth.

"I didn't realize you were so smart, Nagakura. You know a lot about politics."
He stopped and blinked.

"â€¦Didn't realizeâ€¦? Wait, just what did you think of me?"

â€¦

There was a man named Ryoma Sakamoto.
He was a ronin from the

Tosa Domain, and had allied himself with the Satsuma and Choshu Domains as well.

>For a time, the Kyoto Judiciary Commissioner, Mimawarigumi, and even the Shinsengumi were desperate to find him.
After his orchestration of the Restoration of Imperial Rule, however, orders were passed down to leave him alone.

>I only had a general idea of who he was and what he'd done, but even I had figured out that he was an important person, so when I heard Inoue mention him, I listened.
"Ryoma Sakamoto has been assassinated."

>Harada's eyes went wide.
"You serious, Gen? â€|Do they know who did it?"

>"Sakamoto had a lot of enemies," said Nagakura, folding his arms. "Could have been imperialist or loyalists. Hell, it could have just been personal, in which case my money's on Miura of Kishu."
Okita laughed at this.

>"Ha. You think maybe they're looking at us for it? Damnâ€| If the bastard was gonna get killed anyway, I should've done 'im."
Nagakura scowled at him.

>"That's, uh, not very funny coming from youâ€| In fact, weren't we specifically told to leave him alone?"
I'd never met Sakamoto-I barely knew who he was-but I felt somehow that his death would shake the country to its core.

>Inoue frowned.
"As you all know, there was a decision made far above us, and Kondou was ordered to leave Ryoma Sakamoto alone. Unfortunately, the rest of the country is unlikely to see it that way."

>He turned to Harada and Nagakura as he continued.
"A scabbard belonging to a member of the Shinsengumi was found at the scene of his death. There has been a request for an official inquiry."

>"A scabbard? Is that really enough evidence?"
Harada sighed.

>"If it isn't, I'm sure they'll just fabricate more. It's obviously a ruse. Who are they saying it belonged to anyway?"
Inoue's frown deepened.

>"Actuallyâ€|they say it was yours, Harada."
Harada's eyes snapped wide.

>"What?!"
Of all the people to try and frame for murder...Harada?!

>Okita smirked.
"Really, Sano? Damn. Wish you'd brought me with youâ€|"

>Harada glared at him.
"Knock it off, Okita. Besides, my Scabbard's right here. This is idiotic."

>He threw up his hands in exasperation.
Inoue smiled faintly and nodded.

>"I don't suspect you, and neither does anyone else here. Unfortunately, I doubt the rest of the nation will extend you the same courtesy. I imagine they're having trouble determining the real culprit. There was talk that Kyutaro Miura from Kishu asked the Shinsengumi to kill Ryoma."
Miuraâ€| That was the man Nagakura had mentioned. He had some sort of personal quarrel with Sakamoto, which made him a suspect.

>"I'm sure there's plenty of people who'd love to pin this on of the Shinsengumi," said Nagakura, "but unless someone did it and lied about it, there's not way it was us."
Okita's eyes darkened.

>"Unless Sanan decided to go do a little work off the books."
The room fell silent.

>Harada suddenly seemed concerned.
"Howâ€|is Sanan these days? Our reputation is grisly enough, but the rumors I've been hearing about

the night patrol are ever worse."

>It was true that Sanan had been acting stranger and stranger. Although I didn't want to believe it, I had to admit it wasn't that difficult to imagine him doing something like that.
When I passed him on occasion in the hallways, his eyes were dry and thirsty, as if he was always, always hungry for blood.

>"We'll have to be careful, then," said Nagakura, folding his arms. "We can't let people learn about the furies."
"About thatâ€¦"

>"Oh, hey, Kondou. Hijikata-whoa," stammered Harada.
His eyes widened.

>As did Nagakura's.
"Saito?! What the hell are you doing here?!"

>I rubbed vigorously at my eyes, looked, then did it again.
But there was no doubt. The man who'd followed Kondou and Hijikata into the room was the man who'd left to join the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb, Saito himself.

>Inoue however seemed more relieved than shocked.
"Oh, hello Saito. It's been a while. What happened to the Guard?"

>This confused me.
"What are you talking about, Inoue?! There's no way Hijikata would allow anyone from the Guard here! We're prohibited from even talking to them-"

>"Ugh. Justâ€¦shut up, all right? Starting today, Saito's back in the Shinsengumi."
Hijikata's eyes narrowed at me.

>â€¦What?
Thankfully I wasn't the only one out of the loop.

>"What? Hold on a second there, Hijikata," said Harada. "We're glad he's back, don't get me wrong, butâ€¦ What happened with the Guard? And Itou?"
It was Saito who answered.

>"You're mistaken, but understandably. I was never one of Itou's supporters."
Kondou nodded.

>"In fact, Saito joined Itou and his men as a spy, under Toshi's direct orders."
And with that, everything suddenly made sense.

>They say that to fool your enemy, you must first fool your allies, and Saito had been doing just that!
Okita frowned at Saito.

>"What? C'mon Saito. It's not fair for you to go off and have fun without letting me in on it."
Nagakura glanced at Kondou in irritation.

>"Man, you just about scared the pants off meâ€¦ Not cool, Kondou."
"This was all top secret. I'm sorry I had to keep it from all of you."

>It was a surprise, to be sure, but I was glad we'd have Saito back with us again.
I gave him a tentative smile, but he only sighed and shook his head.

>"It's too early to feel relieved. The last six months in the Guard have made it clear: Itou and his followers are going to take action against the Shinsengumi."
Inoue frowned.

>"What sort of action?"
It was Hijikata who answered.

>"Itou is going to expose the Fury Corps to discredit the shogunate. There's even talk that he's working with Satsuma to that end."
If the existence and creation of the monstrous furies was to become public knowledgeâ€¦

>The shogunate's reputation would be irreparably damaged, and the Shinsengumi would undoubtedly suffer as well. Even I could predict that.
"There's more," started Saito. "Itou plans to assassinate the Chief of the Shinsengumi."

>"Youâ€¦you mean Kondou?!"
I felt sick.

Kondou's face was stern and tense, but he kept silent.

>He glanced over at Hijikata.
"The Guard is moving to destroy the Shinsengumi. â€|You've already heard about Sakamoto, right?"

>Harada nodded.
"Yeah, some crap about me being the killer."

>Hijikata's eyes narrowed.
"Right. Well, you have the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb to thank. They've been spreading the rumor that Kyotaro Miura of Kishu hired the Shinsengumi, and that Harada put the sword in him."

>Hijikata explained that Miura insisted that he didn't do it, but is sure that someone's going to take a stab at him eventually.
"So, Saito's going to be guarding Miura for now. if it looks like he just left and then came back, it won't be too hard for Itou to put two and two together."

>Saito nodded.
"I understand. Until this matter is settled, it is better that I'm not seen here."

>Here Hijikata paused for a moment.
The room was utterly silent. Every one of us could sense that what came next would be very, very important.

"Kashitaro Itouâ€| It's not enough for you to expose the Fury Corpsâ€| You have to try to kill Kondou too, huhâ€|"

>He spoke quietly, almost to himself, as if sharing a final moment with a former comrade.
Then he looked up, and when he spoke his voice was like cold steel. The voice of the Demon.

>"It's too bad it has to be this way, but we don't have a choice. Itou dies."
Kondou frowned, clearly troubled by this decision.

>"Hm. I suppose you're right. It can't be helped."
He nodded, and that was that. The Shinsengumi would kill Kashitaro Itou.

>Hijikata folded his arms and started to lay out the plan.
"First, we'll invite Itou to Kondou's second home. I'll be there too. Once he's dead, we can use Itou's corpse to lure out the rest of the Guard and kill them."

>He glanced at Shinpachi and Sano.
"Nagakura, Harada, I'm assigning you and your divisions to this. Take care of it."

>Okita glanced at Hijikata expectantly.
"Hey, Hijikata. Who do you want me to kill?"

>Hijikata's expression softened a bit.
"No one. You're staying here, in bed. You've still got that cough, don't you? You're sick. Saito'll be here for a few days, so you'll have someone to play with."

>Okita folded his arms and looked away.
"You're a real bastard, Hijikata."

>It all seemed very calculated, for murder.
I hadn't realized I'd been sitting still, dumbfounded, until I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder.

>"â€|Saito?"
"This will be the end of the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb. If we are going to return Heisuke to the fold, it must be now or never."

>"*Gasp*"
He was right.

>If they meant to kill Guard, that included Heisuke!
"Um, Hijikata? What are you going to do with Heisuke? He's part of the Guard nowâ€|"

>Nagakura grinned.
"Isn't that obvious? We'll save him, of course."

>Hijikata's face hardened.
"No. He fights us, he dies."

>"â€|Wh-What? No! You can't mean that! That's wrong!"
Hijikata showed no sign that he'd even heard me.
>I watched his back disappear out the door.
I turned to Kondou, anger and panic welling up inside me.
>"You're actually going to order them to kill Heisuke?! Don't you care what happens to him?!"
"Of course we care!" he snapped. "I know that, deep down, Toshi wants to save him tooâ€| I'llâ€|I'll talk to him later."
>The last few words he mumbled to himself, and then coughed nervously, as if embarrassed that he'd raised his voice.
It was only then that I realized how much Kondou was suffering. How much they were all suffering, even Hijikataâ€|
>"I'm sorry forâ€|for saying that."
"No, no, no need to apologize. It makes me happy, quite honestly. I'm glad people care for Heisuke."

>Kondou let out a slow breath, then looked up at me and smiled.
He turned to Nagakura and Harada, and spoke in a low voice.
>"I'm asking you this not as your chief, but as Isami Kondou. â€|Let Heisuke live. Andâ€|if you can, try to convince him to come back."
Nagakura grinned and nodded.
>"â€|Got it."
Harada placed a hand on Kondou's shoulder.
>"Leave it to us, Chief."
As they discussed the details of their orders, I sat and wondered what I should do. What could I do?

>"â€|I trust everything clear? If you have questions, now is the time."
"â€|Wait."
>I heard myself begin to speak, my voice surprisingly calm and dignified.
"I haven't been given any orders. I would like to help."
>Kondou frowned.
"This is aâ€|dirty job. You really shouldn't be involved."
>It was true; this wasn't a patrol, or even a guarding mission. This was the assassination of a former comrade, and an attack on men who'd split from the Shinsengumi.
Still, I wanted to do what I could. It might be my last chance to see Heisuke.
>"Please, let me go. I won't get in the way."
Nagakura glanced at me with mixed concern and frustration.
>"â€|This isn't like anything you've done before, Chizuru. You understand that, right?"
Harada narrowed his eyes at me.
>"We're killing someone who used to be one of us. â€|Much as we don't want to, we might even have to kill Heisuke."
"â€|I know. It's not something to be taken lightly."
>I knew that the Shinsengumi had carried out these sorts of black operations before.
There was no way I could have stayed with them as long as I had and not known, but that was why I couldn't simply stand by and let them shoulder all the responsibility.
>I'd spent enough time looking away until the deed was done. Now more.
"Perhaps it's presumptuous of me to say so, butâ€|I consider myself a member of the Shinsengumi."
>Kondou sighed.
"Then you're determined to do this, I see."
>His face had lost its usual warmth. It wasn't anger, or cruelty that it showed now, but the gravity of a general addressing his men.
"Tell me then. How do you intend to help?"
>I had already decided.
I would help lure Itou into the trap the Shinsengumi had planned for him.
>He was quite cautious at first, but after some prompting to talk about issues he was familiar with and the liberal application of alcohol, he loosened up significantly.
His high spirits provided an almost sickening contrast to the fate that awaited him.

“

>"Nationalism is very nearly a taboo term these days, you know."
I said nothing.

His laughter echoed hollowly through my skull. In his smile I could already see the rictus grin of a corpse.

>We were entertaining Itou at Kondou's second home, and all night the alcohol had flown easily.
"Even the Satsuma and Choshu have finally realized they cannot rival foreign technology and influence, and have begun to adopt outside culture."

>Kondou chuckled softly.
"I see. Such as“?”

>"Ah, let me think“ Yes! For example, the gun. Firearms! They've managed to import a great many guns, and have been training their men in Western warfare and tactics."
He nodded sagely, and gestured somewhat awkwardly with his cup.

>Kondou nodded solemnly in agreement.
Hijikata smiled.

>"Interesting. Maybe we should start thinking about training the Shinsengumi in Western tactics."
"Yes!" said Itou happily. "You agree! You must be able to see the big picture these days!"

>Hijikata nodded.
"Yeah. We might be on different paths, but we're all headed for the same destination. “Another drink, Itou?"

>"Here you are“" I said pouring him another cup.
It was perfectly normal alcohol: no poison or drugs, but we were making him drunk in order to murder him. How was that any different then me pouring poison straight into his cup?

>"Ah“"
Itou frowned at me.

>"My goodness dear, you're shaking. Are you all right? Are you feeling ill?"
Kondou laughed.

>"You needn't worry about her, Itou. She's just nervous about speaking to you."
Itou smiled at me.

>"Oh my, am I so terribly intriguing? What a bad girl you are."
Hijikata gave a sad smile.

>"Yeah, she gives herself away too easily. Kid needs a little self-control."
The subtle message was clear: hide your emotions, Chizuru.

>I swallowed and nodded.
It had been my choice to help with Itou's“assassination. The least I could do now was not get in the way.

>"Yes“ I'm sorry."
Itou turned to me and smiled.

>"Oh rubbish. This is a party! We needn't be so stiff!"
Kondou laughed again.

>"Ha ha! Itou, you truly are a man worthy of distinction.<p>

“

>Time passed, and Alcohol was drunk.
"Well, it was nice to enjoy a meaningful conversation. And now, farewell."

>After spending all night expounding on his theories for the advancement of Japanese society, Itou finally stumbled off into the darkness, more than a little drunk.
I watched him disappear. It would be the last time I would see him alive.

>"“This feels wrong, Toshi." sighed Kondou.
"It's the path we chose," replied Hijikata quietly. "It's our duty to do this, but that doesn't mean we have to be proud of it. Sometimes the job's dirty."

>"I“ I“"
I couldn't get the words out, but they weren't listening anyway.

>Hijikata turned to Kondou.
"Look, Chief“ This one's not on your

head, all right? i mad the plan. I gave the orders."

>Hijikata let out a long sigh, his eyes staring off into the darkness where Itou had gone.
What happened afterward wasâ€|not something I cared to remember. Itou, too drunk to fight back, was quickly and easily killed by the men waiting for him.

>...But the night was far from over.
Battle and bloodshed waited at Aburano Koji for Nagakura and the men sent to ambush the Guardians of the Imperial tomb.

>Fate waited for Okita, convalescing at the headquarters in Fudodo Village.
For them-for all of us-waited a night after which nothing would be the same.

â€|

>The assassination of Itou and the destruction of the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb was later known as the Aburano Koji Incident.
Both the Shinsengumi and Guard were surprised by the sudden appearance of Satsuma troops, and by the demons who accompanied them.

>Both parties had fallen for the Satsuma trap, and the battlefield was thrown into confusion.
During the fight, Heisuke was mortally wounded, and had no choice but to drink the Water of Life and become a fury, or die.

>As the battle of Aburano Koji was taking place, the headquarters of the Shinsengumi came under attack from Chikage Kazama.
The monstrous thing my father had made was slowly devouring the Shinsengumi.

>How long before the Water of Life swallowed them whole?<p>

13. Chapter 3-4

Yay! The end of Chapter Three!

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 3-4<p>

December 1867

Scarcely a month had passed since Aburano Koji. Saito and Heisuke had returned, but the Shinsengumi was hardly back to normal. A dark, tense atmosphere pervaded the compound.

>Many men had lost their lives in Kazama's attacks. Even more had been injured during the attack at Aburano Koji. Among them was Heisuke.
Several of the rank-and-file soldiers had seen him mortally wounded. He had looked as if he would not survive.

>For that reason, Heisuke was declared officially dead, and made a member of the Fury Corps.
Saito hadn't been wounded, but many among the common soldiers began to call him a coward. To them, he had left the Shinsengumi to join Itou, then betrayed his new master when he sensed a change in fortunes.

>I saw no reason why he shouldn't set them straight, and say that he had never truly left the Shinsengumi, but he claimed he would rather stay silent than tarnish the honor of the commander and chief who had ordered his actions.
As such, it was decided that Saito would leave the compound until tempers had been allowed to cool.

>He was sent to stay at Tenma in order to protect Kyutaro Miura, an official of the Kishu Domain.<p>

â€|

>The night of the battle at Aburano Koji was a turning point for the Shinsengumi.
For the men who didn't know the details, it was simply a battle against their former comrades, the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb.

>Those better informed knew that the situation with the Satsuma of Ryoma Sakamoto had been part of a much larger plan.
Only the heads of the Shinsengumi knew the whole story: The activities of the demons, and Heisuke's transformation into a fury.

>Such an important battle had stirred up the atmosphere in the compound, and for several days there were excited men everywhere, shouting and talking. Moments of silence were few and far between.
I felt I would only be in the way if I was wandering around the grounds, so I did my best to stay in my room by myself.

>When had everything gone so wrong? Why had all of this happened?
I turned those questions over and over in my mind, but found no answers.

>My door suddenly slid open and someone walked in.
"Ah, thank goodness, you're here. If you'd gone out, I wouldn't have been able to look for you."

>"Sanan?! Butâ€|it's daytime! Are you sure you're all right?!"
His smile almost seemed real.

>"Yes, yes. I've just had a revelation. I can't possibly stay in bed."
His eyes glittered withâ€|something, and even though he was smiling, I could feel the fingers of dread begin to poke at the base of my spine.

>"Well? Will you listen to my idea?"
It didn't really seem like a question, but I nodded anyway.

>"You're a demonâ€|"
The words were sudden and unexpected.

>"And as a demon, you are stronger, faster, and more resilient than a human. Demonic superiority was displayed quite clearly by those demons who attacked us just the other night."
"What are you trying to say?"

>"A demon possesses immense power. It follows that the blood which flows through demon veins should be similarly powerful. Perhaps it is even potent enough to completely counteract the madness of the furies."
I didn't know how the Water of Life worked, but Sanan's explanation seemed logical, even if it was a bitâ€|manic.

>"How can you know that for sure?"
"Since before I became a fury, I've been researching how the Water of Life works. I know more about it than anyone else here. How could I be wrong, then? In any event, I believe it's worth testing."

>He turned to me with another smile, this one more creepy.
"If I am correctâ€| Oh, it would be wonderful! Your very existence could save the Fury Corps! ...No, the entire Shinsengumi!"

>"Waitâ€|"
Sanan's eyes had grown painfully sharp, and I almost thought I could hear the barest edge of madness to his voice.

>"Nowâ€|"
Calmly and purposefully, he drew his sword from its scabbard. There was no madness or bloodlust to his movements, and that only made them all the more terrifying.

>"Oh, there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm not going to kill you or anything. I just want a small sample of your blood. That's allâ€|"
I took a step backâ€|twoâ€|

>Sanan and his sword came closer.
He lifted it, and the steel blade shimmered in the light. I closed my eyes.

>Suddenly the door slid open again.
"What is this, Sanan?"

>"Oh, Hijikata. Excellent timing. Please, give me a hand here."
"Hi-Hijikataâ€|"

>Hijikata walked slowly toward us, his hand drifting near the hilt of his sword.
With cam purpose, he stepped between Sanan and I.

>"What are you doing? This could be a great breakthrough for the Shinsengumi."
Hijikata narrowed his eyes at him.

>"This is the last time, Sanan. What are you doing?"
"I'm searching for a way to treat the madness of the furies. For the good of the Shinsengumi."

>Hijikata glanced at me then turned back to his friend.
"And that means you have to cut her?"

>"I'm not going to kill her. I only need a little of her blood."
The room was thick with tension, but I sensed no hatred from either Sanan or Hijikata.

>"We've lost so many of the furies. Many of our human soldiers have fallen as well. If we are to effectively utilize the furies we have left, as well as the ones we are about to create, then we must find a way to temper their madness. If we abandon the furies and what they offer, then future battles will only become more difficult. More of our men will die. Everything I do, I do for the Shinsengumi. I know you for an intelligent man, Hijikata. Surely you understand. And yet you won't allow Yukimura to share her blood?"
"That's not what I mean."

>Sanan blinked at him.
"Oh?"

>Hijikata narrowed his eyes at him.
"Sanan, you are a colonel of the Shinsengumi. Are you really ready to break the Code? The Code says we don't fight each other, for any reason. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

>"Ah, of course."
Sanan glanced at me.

>"However, Yukimura is not, technically, a member of the Shinsengumi."
Hijikata just about growled at him.

>"Maybe not, but she's been here long enough. She might as well be."
Sanan put away his sword and sighed.

>"Then I have no choice."
Hijikata watched him closely, his own hand still near his sword.

>Sanan smiled again.
"I'll leave for now, then, but please consider what I've said."

>Hijikata's expression softened a bit.
"Sure, but it won't change anything. Why should we cut her open and take her blood? Besides, even if I change my mind, Knodou will never let you do it."

>Sanan sighed and his shoulders slumped.
"It's an easy decision for you and Kondou to make. You don't have the same investment in this. Heisuke's a fury now too, though. This will effect him as well. So I encourage you to consider what's best for your friends when you make your decision."

>Those final words cut like a knife, deeper than anything he'd said before.
Hijikata narrowed his eyes again.

>"Can I say something?"
His voice was strained, as if he were pulling it up from somewhere deep within his soul.

>"Of course."
"Your reasoning is correct. I always has been. But Sanan, tell me you aren't doing this because the bloodlust has taken your mind. Tell me that some sick desire to taste her blood isn't what's driving you to this. Can I trust you?"

>Sanan gave a kind smile.
"Of course. My only concern is for the Shinsengumi."

>He turned to me.
"Goodbye then, Yukimura. We'll talk again"

>He then ducked out of the room.
"*Sigh*"

>Only after I'd heard his footsteps fade away down the hall did I begin to breath again.
Hijikata turned to me with a more gentle look on his face.

>"Hrm. You okay?"
I saw him relax, almost imperceptibly. The bowstring-tight tension of a moment before was gone.
>"Or at least mostly gone." He gave me a sad smile.
>"Sorry about that." "No, thank you for helping me."
>"Nothing to thank me for." "But"
>There was something I wanted to say to him; a question that had been on my mind for a while. For a moment, I thought perhaps now was the time to ask, but
>"No. I shut my mouth."
>Hijikata gave me a puzzled look. "What?"
>"Uh, um" "Perhaps I was simply afraid of what his answer would be."
>Perhaps after hearing my question, he would no longer allow me to stay with the Shinsengumi
>"No, I couldn't stay with them forever. Nothing good would come of avoiding the issue. Best I simply face it."
>Still, I was afraid to ask. "I don't have all day. If you have something to say, say it."
>I'd already drawn his attention, and apparently his ire. There was no point to backing out now. "Um, why do you keep protecting me like this?"
>"Weren't you listening? That wasn't about you. It was about Sanan, and the Code. Besides, it's not like he was actually trying to kill you. At worst, I saved you from a scratch." "No, I don't mean just now" I mean all the other times. When Kazama attacked us, everyone in the Shinsengumi put their lives on the line, for me! All he wanted was me. You could have just given me up, and he would have left you alone."
>He turned to me, though he didn't appear to be angry. "Kazama works for our enemies. That makes him our enemy. What sort of warrior doesn't fight his enemies?"
>I had to admit, that did seem reasonable. He then gave me one of his you're-being-silly smiles.
>"Besides, you're Kodo's kid. If we want to find him, we need you. Didn't we talk about this when you go here?" "Yes, but that was a long time ago. Things have changed. I don't think finding my father is going to be enough to resolve this situation anymore."
>Now he was giving me his just-be-quiet look. "Look, we said we'd protect you, so we will. A samurai doesn't go back on his word. A man who breaks a promise just because something's changed isn't a man."

>Even I knew that he was only using my father as an excuse, but I had a feeling that if I pointed that out directly he'd get angry.
Still, that he would make excuses like this, and let me stay, and keep me safe It could only mean that Hijikata and the Shinsengumi had finally accepted me.
>That thought was like a ray of light, pushing away the doubt I'd felt only moments before. ...But I needed to be careful not to get carried away.

"All right, why'd you go quiet?"
>If they had accepted me, then I wanted to help. I wanted to do something.
Then again, what could I possibly do? I couldn't fight, I didn't have any special knowledge, aside from a little second-hand medicine
>I was more of a burden than an asset, if I was honest with myself.
What was I going to do?
>"Um" He turned to me impatiently.
>"What? Is there something else?" "I want to help. Please, if there's anything, anything at all I can do"
>Now he looked angry. "Help?"

>I gulped.
"Umâ€|"

>Oh no. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. He really didn't look very happy.
"Um, because, ahâ€|"

>Was he really madâ€|?
I was starting to very much regret speaking up, so much so that I began to wish Sanan would come back, just to give Hijikata someone else to glare at.

>â€|No, that would have been bad, too.
But what was I going to do? Give up?

>No, I'd come to far. If I backed down, then nothing would change. I couldn't be one of them if I just let them protect me all the time.
"Please. I just want to be useful. I'll do anything."

>Hijikata sighed in irritation.<p>

"â€|"

>The silence stretched out so long I thought I was going to scream.
"â€|I suppose you would be more discreet than one of our boys."

>He spoke to himself, barely loud enough for me to hear.
"Hijikataâ€|?"

>"Brush and paper."
"Huh?"

>He scowled at me.
"Bring me a brush and some paper. You do have that in here, don't you? Hurry."

>Y-Yes! Right away!"
I scrambled across the room, grabbed a brush and paper, and handed them to Hijikata.

>He took them silently, still scowling and quickly began to draw.
â€|A map?

>"What is that?"
He ignored me, and continued drawing.

>"â€|You know Saito is at Tenma guarding Miura, right?"
"Yes."

>"I want you to take him something. Will you do that?"
"Do you think I can?"

>He smiled.
"Yes. One of our boys would stand out too much. You're the best option I've got right now. Can I trust you with this?"

>"Yes! Of course! ...Uh, sir!"
I was thrilled to help of course, but I was even more ecstatic to be given a task specially suited to me.

>"There. I drew you a map. Keep to this and you shouldn't get lost."
"Right. Thank you!"

>The map was pretty straightforward, but I still barely knew my way around Kyoto. Without it, I likely would have gotten lost.
"All right, I'm going!"

>I turned to leave, and only a concerted effort kept me from skipping to the door.
"Hold on, genius. Hard to deliver a message if you don't have one."

>"O-Ohâ€|"
Hijikata sighed.

>"You're making me nervous, kid. You sure you can do this?"
"Y-Yes! Of course! I'll do a great job!"

>"â€|Here's a letter for Saito. Make sure you don't drop it, orâ€|lose it somehow."
"Yes, I'll be very careful. Is there anything you want me to tell him?"

>"Everything I have to say is in that letter."
"Understood. Then I'm off!"

>This time I wasn't able to fully subdue the urge to skip.
"â€|And there she goesâ€| Hey! Yamazaki! Shimada!"

>"Yes, sir."
"Did you call?"

>"I sent Chizuru to take Saito a letter. keep an eye on her, but don't let her see you. If anything happens, make sure she's okay."
"Understood."

>"Hopefully if something does happen it'll just be some idiots trying to get to Miura or somethingâ€¦ There's some pretty dangerous guys after her, though. if the demons show up, just get her back here immediately. I don't care if you have to carry her like a sack of rice. Just make sure all three of you come back."
"Yes, sir. We're off."

>"Yeah, get going."<p>

â€¦

>I stuffed the letter into my shirt, double-checked to make sure it wouldn't fall out, and then opened up the map.
"This is my chance. I have to do a good job!"

>I looked down at the map and started moving forward.
"According to this mapâ€¦ It looks like I have a ways to go. I'd better hurry, or it's going to be evening by the time I get there. I should run!"

>Even without the desire to arrive before evening, I likely would have run anyway: I was far too excited to walk!<p>

â€¦

>Thanks to Hijikata's map, I found my way to Tenma without incident, although evening had come by the time I arrived.
I'd been told earlier that Saito had taken a room under the name "Yamaguchi".

>After a short wait, the receptionist directed me to his room.
"Um, Sai-...Yamaguchi. Sorry to bother you."

>His eyes widened upon seeing me.
"Oh. You."

>One of his eyebrows shifted up fractionally in response to my presence.
Although he'd likely been expecting the letter, I was somewhat less predictable, having only been assigned the task earlier that day.

>"I'm sorry you got someone as inexperienced as me."
His expression softened immediately.

>"No, you misunderstand. I was only surprised. I expected to receive new orders soon, but I didn't think you'd be the one to deliver them."
"R-Right. Well, I asked if there was anything I could do to help, andâ€¦ This was it."

>He smiled and closed his eyes.
"Hm. Well, I can see his thinking. It's a good plan. One of our regulars would have drawn undue attention to this location."

>He opened his eyes and held my gaze again.
"The captains are too recognizable and too valuable. New members might not be noticed, but how can we know where their true loyalties lie?"

>He smiled again.
"You, on the other hand, can move unnoticed, and your loyalty is beyond question. Hijikata made an excellent choice."

>"O-Ohâ€¦ Thank you."
There was something very pleasant about being told I was trustworthy.

>"The letter."
I blinked.

>"Oh, of courseâ€¦"
I pulled out the letter and handed it over.

>He tore it open and read it over quickly, then lit it on a nearby lantern and watched patiently until it was nothing more than ash.
"Um...Saito?"

>"Yamaguchi."
"R-Right. Umâ€¦ are you sure it was okay toâ€¦ burn it?"

>"I've read it. I know what it says. Why should I leave it intact to be intercepted?"
"Oh. Of courseâ€¦"

>He smiled at me a third time.
"Thank you for delivering this letter. Good work."

>"Oh, well, just doing my job! No need for thanks."
I clearly hadn't done anything very impressive-anyone could have done it-but it did feel nice to be thanked.
>After all, I had done just what was asked of me, and I hadn't messed anything up. I was rather proud of myself.
Now that the job was done, though, I wasn't sure what I should do nextâ€|
>It occurred to me that Hijikata had hardly been in a sunny mood when he'd given me the letter. If I dawdled after delivering it, that mood was extremely unlikely to improve.
"All right, I'm heading back. This took a bit longer than I'd expected, so I need to hurry."
>"Of course. Be careful."
He looked so lonely though that I almost changed my mind and stayed.

â€|

>"*Pant* *Pant* *Pant*"
I went back the same way I'd come, but by the time I returned to the Shinsengumi compound, the sun had set completely.
>I hoped I wasn't too late.
Hopefully Hijikata wouldn't be too madâ€|
>"I'm back."
"Ohâ€| come in."
>"Rightâ€|"
The moment I stepped through the door, I could tell he was in a foul mood. The very air was heavy with it.
>"Um, sorryâ€|"
He whipped around and glared at me.
>"What, did you lose the letter? Or did you not even make it there? You got lostâ€|I knew it."
"No, of course not! I got there just fine, and I gave Saito the letter."
>He pursed his lips clearly trying to hid that he felt bad for the accusations.
"Good. Then why did you apologize just now?"

>"Ohâ€| Well, you looked really upset. I thought you were mad that I'd taken so long."
"*Sigh*"
As he sighed, I saw the tension in his shoulders ease just a little bit.
"No, I'm not mad at you."
>"Oh. Really?"
"It may surprise you to learn that I have many other things to think about besides you."
>I blushed slightly.
"Yes. Right. Didâ€|something bad happen?"

>"Yeah. A lot of bad things. You know we've been having some trouble within the Shinsengumi, but things are starting to get dicey with the people up above us, too. You're practically one of us, so I might as well tell you. There're rumblings that something might happen to the shogunate. If the shogunate's position changes, then so does Aizu's position in Kyotoâ€|and eventually that trickles down to us."
"What's going to happen?"
>He gave me a sad smile.
"Well, unfortunately we won't know until it does. Course, it's not like me worrying about it is going to do anyone any good. I can make some educated guesses, and prepare the Shinsengumi for some things, butâ€|"
>Perhaps it was because he'd never been so open with me before, but I'd never thought about just how much Hijikata did for the Shinsengumi.
The Shinsengumi's fate was his fate, and his decisions could steer it to glory or destruction.
>It was an unimaginably heavy burden to someone like me.
"Umâ€| Is there anything else I can do to help?"
>"What, running off to Tenma wasn't enough for you?"
"If you-no, if the Shinsengumi is in a rough spot, thenâ€| Please, I just want to help! I want to be useful!"
>His scowl deepened, but he said nothing.
"Please, Hijikata."
>I bowed down until all I could see was the floor.
"Please, I'm begging youâ€|"

>I bent down as far as I could. He had to.
"*Sigh* Damn."
>I heard him move, and felt something touch my chin.
I opened my eyes to see his fingers under my chin, warm and dry. He lifted my face up until I was looking strait into his eyes.
>He was so close that I could feel his breath.
"You say you want to help."
>"Yes."
"Do you think it's wrong for you to think that?"
>"â€|No."
"Do you want this for selfish reasons?"
>"Noâ€| I mean, it's not like I want to make a name for myself, or something like that. You've all risked your lives to protect me, over and over. I just want to give you something backâ€|"
"â€|Then don't bow so easily. You believe you're right. Why should you bow if you think you're right?"
>"Y-Yesâ€|"
"If you believe something, then don't ever bow or yield. Hold your head high and walk tall. You won't win if you don't keep your eyes on the prize."
>"Yes."
I looked back at him with all the composure I could muster.
>"I want to help. If there's anything I can do, please, let me do it."
"Fine."
>He gave me a quick smile, and returned to where he'd been sitting when I came in.
"If you want to help so much, go make me some tea."
>"Yes!"
He smiled slyly.
>"The fate of the Shinsengumi rests on this tea. Don't screw it up."
"Yes, sir! Leave it to me!"
>Unable to hide my smile, I leapt up and bounded out of the room.
Just before I was out of earshot, I heard Hijikata mumble to himselfâ€|
>"What's going to happen to us nowâ€|"<p>

â€|
>The Shinsengumi, once solid, now wavered.
What would happen to them? What would happen to the Fury Corps?
>Men were forced to watch as their friends became the undead monsters known as furiesâ€| Was it any wonder that they found themselves conflicted, or that tempers began to rise?
Several days later, the order was given to begin the Imperial Restoration.
>The emperor would be restored to power, and his court would once again rule the nation.
The position of the shogun would be abolished, and Kyoto's military and Judiciary Commissioner positions would be eliminated.
>All that the Shinsengumi had fought for and believed in was falling to pieces.<p>

14. Chapter 4

_Here we are... The final chapter before __**his**__ story truly begins... Well I hope you have all enjoyed it so far...cause this is where it starts to get real interesting ^o^_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 4<p>

December 1867

With the new year just around the corner, the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance

formed an army and marched on the capital.
>In response, the Shinsengumi moved to the Fushimi magistrate's office and began to prepare for war.<p>

â€|
>"Hey! Bad news, guys! The chief's been attacked!"
There had been no witnesses, and the culprit had escaped unseen. Their motives could only be guessed at.

â€|
>"We still haven't figured out who attacked the chief?"
"I'll bet you anything it's those bastards from that Satsuma-Choshu Alliance!"

>I was becoming very worried.<p>

Ever since the attack on Kondou, the atmosphere at the Fushimi magistrate's office had been tense to say the least. I felt it increase as I stepped into the meeting room, carrying tea for the captains.

>"Here's you teaâ€|"
Harada was the only one who looked up.

>"Oh, thanks. Could you just leave it here?"
I seemed to have walked in on a very serious discussion. All around the room were tense, drawn faces.

>Nagakura glanced at Hijikata.
"So what's your plan? The Satsuma-Choshu Alliance wants power in the court, but they're also looking to have the emperor grant them all of the shogunate's assets and holdings. There's no other way to look at it: They're trying to start a war. We'd be smart to start preparing for one."

>There was an odd lack of emotion in Hijikata's eyes.
"You have a point. They've been sucking up to the emperor, and they come and go at the palace like they own the place."

>He closed his eyes.
"Wasn't it just the other day that they were declared enemies of the court, and not even allowed in Kyoto?"

>He turned to the rest of us.
"Now, so far as preparing for warâ€|"

>Hijikata's eyes darted from man to man, across the room, looking for someone to speak up.
It was Shimada who answered his plea.

>"Sanan has been pushing hard to augment the Fury Corps."
Harada glared at him.

>"I'm against that. This is war, not subduing the odd ronin. There are going to be enemies and allies everywhere in battle. I don't think we'll be able to control them. They're powerful, but it's too risky."
Nagakura nodded.

>"Agreed. Besides, it's inhumane."
Saito glanced at Shimada then turned to Shinpachi and Sano.

>"Then what do you suggest? If you wish to disapprove, you should offer an alternate path."
"We're working on that," snapped Nagakura. "If it was so easy to come up with a solution, you really think we'd be in this mess?"

>He shot Saito a glare.
Shimada turned to Hijikata.

>"What's your take on this, Commander?"
Hijikata furrowed his brow and frowned.

>"â€|Let me think about it. We need to see what the Satsuma and Choshu are going to do, and we have to consider what the shogunate wants."<p>

Kondou's injury had put everyone on edge, even without a war inching closer, day by day.

>I wondered how Heisuke and Sanan felt about what was coming, now that they were furies.
The Fury Corps was only active after I went to sleep, so I never got to see them.

â€|

>When I couldn't fall asleep that night, I decided to go visit Okita, who was still trying to recover from his illness.
"Good evening, Okita. How are you feeling?"

>I arrived to find Heisuke had also come to visit Okita, to pass the time.
He blinked and looked up at me.

>"Oh, hey Chizuru. What're you doing up so late?"
He gave me a silly grin.

>"People might get the wrong idea if they see a girl visiting a man's room in the middle of the night."
I smiled back.

>"Oh Heisukeâ€| You're smarter than that. You know Okita and I aren'tâ€|you know."
He looked away.

>"Yeah, I guess you have a point. That's not really your sort of thing, is it?"
I blinked and then narrowed my eyes.

>"Heyâ€| What do you mean?"
His eyes took on a sly look.

>"What do you mean, 'what do you mean'? C'monâ€|"
He chuckled, and tossed Okita what seemed to have been intended as a knowing grin, but the older man was far too annoyed to notice.

>Okita flicked his annoyed eyes to me.
"So why're you here? I assume you've got a reason for visiting me in the middle of the night."

>"Oh...Umâ€|"
His tone stole away some of my determination, but I pushed ahead anyway.

>"Do you guys know that, um, Sanan wants to augment the Fury Corps?"
As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Heisuke's face clouded over.

>"Yeah, of course."
Okita was a little more forthcoming.

>"Well, if you were in Sanan's position, wouldn't you do the same thing?"
He suddenly looked frustrated.

>"If I wasn't likeâ€|like this, I'd pick up my sword right now and go get revenge for Kondou."<p>

Okita's bedrest was clearly rankling him. After all, he'd known Kondou for a long time-since they'd met in Edo, long before the beginning of the Shinsengumi.

>"What do you think, Heisuke?"
He frowned.

>"M-Meâ€|? Well, Iâ€|hmâ€| I did decide to drink the Water of Life, butâ€| I'm not gonna lie, I was worried about what would happen to me. â€|Sanan says we should have more men in the Fury Corps. He says we'll never win, otherwise."
"Ohâ€|"

>He was so unlike the Heisuke I remembered, so stern and cold, that couldn't help but feel sad as well.
Okita glanced at me and folded his arms.

>"Well, no matter what Sanan says, at the end of the day it's going to be Hijikata who makes the call."
Heisuke sighed.

>"You're right, but the Fury Corps already exists. We can't pretend it doesn't."
Okita smiled.

>"Then maybe Sanan's right, and we should use the Fury Corps however we see fit. â€|At least they can still wield swords."
His last words were cold, hateful, and filled with self-derision.

>Perhaps we could use the furies as a weapon. They might help us to win the coming war. Their strength would be an undeniable military asset.
But once the war was overâ€| What would become of them?

>I was afraid to ask that question, because I feared I already knew the answer.<p>

â€|
>The next day, an unexpected visitor arrived.
"Oh!"
>"Hello, Chizuru. It's been far too long."
"Senâ€|? Kimigiku? Why are you here?"
>It was Kimigiku who answered.
"We've business with the Chief. Can you go get him for us?"
>"Ohâ€| Kondou isn't in good enough shape to speak to anyone. Perhaps Hijikataâ€|"
Sen smiled.
>"Then Hijikata will serve admirably."
"All right. Please, come inside."

â€|
>"â€|Huh. We don't usually allow visitors in here. What do you want?"
Sen frowned.
>"My apologies for intruding, but it was imperative that I speak with you today."
"Um, I'll go make some teaâ€|"
>But just as I was about to leaveâ€|
"No thank you, but that's not necessary. I shall take my leave as soon as I am finished. And in fact, I would prefer you stay. You may wish to hear this as well."

>"O-Okayâ€|"
What did she have to say that was so important, and that might be something I should hear?
>I sat down in a corner, and did my best to pay attention.
"I have come to discuss your 'furies'."

When Hijikata'd heard the word "furies", I saw his face twitch.
>"I will get straight to the point. How much longer will you employ them?"
"What do you mean?"
>Sen frowned.
"You've kept them enslaved for quite some time. I believe you know exactly what I mean. The furies are a failed experiment. Even the shogunate has admitted to that."
>She narrowed her eyes.
"They are too much for your organization to deal with. With demon on your trail, you would do well to wash your hands of furies."
>Hijikata's frown deepened.
"Isn't it up to us to decide whether they're a failure or not? We've done our own research on the Water of Life. I don't think it's your place to judge us. Ma'am."
>He narrowed his eyes at Sen, and they glittered like spear points, but she seemed unconcerned.
It was Kimigiku who spoke up.
>"Then are you aware that the Shinsengumi's furies have been murdering people on the street to test their strength?"
Hijikata's eyes flicked to her and widened.
>"What?"
For a split second, his cold mask dropped, and I saw genuine confusion and dismay on his face.
>Then it was gone, and he was cold and composed once again.
"Where did you hear that?"
>"I've no reason to tell you, but rest assured that it was from a reliable source. You have not been able to keep the Water of Life from driving your men mad. Your job is to protect the safety of the capital, correct? And yet you men roam the streets, killing innocent civilians. It disgusts me. Before this becomes common knowledge, I strongly suggest you disband the Fury Corps."<p>

Kimigiku's logic was sound. Hijikata had no counter-argument.

>Everyone in the room had fallen silent.
Butâ€|was it true? Were the furies indeed cutting people down in the street for the thrill of killing?
>If the Fury Corps was disbanded, then Sanan and Heisuke

wouldâ€|
Every one of us waited for Hijikata's answer with bated breath.

>My heart roared in my ears.
But it was Sen who broke the silence.

>"â€|I suppose we can table this for the moment. There is something else I must discuss."
With this, she turned and looked at me.

>"Chizuru, will you please leave with us?"
"Whatâ€|?"

>Hadn't we already covered this the last time she came to visit?
"I know we spoke before, but the situation has changed. You do understand that, don't you?"

>"Soon war will break out in Kyoto," said Kimigiku. "If you are going to escape, this is your chance."
I knew war was coming, but to hear the truth presented so baldly wasâ€|jarring.

>"I don't believe the Shinsengumi will be able to protect you," said Sen, "once the war begins. Please, come with us."
Hijikata clearly found this insulting.

>"Wait a minute. Are you suggesting we can't handle it?"
"The truth is sometimes hard to accept. If Kazama returns, can you protect her from him? What if he comes to call while you are locked in a battle elsewhere against the Satsuma and Choshu? Will you be able to protect her then?"

>Hijikata scowled but said nothing.
Sen's expression softened.

>"And in any event, she is a demon, not a human. She should be with her own kind. We can protect her."
She turned from Hijikata to face me once again.

>"You see? You should come with us. If you leave, then they can concentrate wholly on the battles to come."
"Umâ€|"

>Her words hit like blows, but she spoke the truth.
War would soon break out, and perhaps remaining with the Shinsengumi would be dangerous for me and for them.

>I would be useless in war: I was no soldier.
Even soâ€|I wanted to stay.

I looked over at Hijikata, hoping he might give me an answer.

He only furrowed his brow and looked the other way, saying nothing.

>What was I to do?
I was sure Sen was right, and I should leave, butâ€|

>The words just couldn't come.
In truth, I didn't want to leave. I hoped that maybe some day, all of the maddeness and war would end, and then I could be a human beingâ€|not a demon.

>"What do you say?" asked Sen, on the verge of impatient. "You really ought to leave. You'll much safer with usâ€|"<p>

Her voice was kind, and I knew she had only my very interests at heart, but I still couldn't bring myself to respond.

>Hijikata, of course, saw straight through me.
"â€|You don't want to leave, do you?"

>"Huh? Umâ€|"
"Then stay. What's there to think about?"

>I blinked and looked up to find him smiling at me.
"B-Butâ€|is that really okay?"

>If Kazama came after me againâ€|
He scowled at me.

>"I'm not going to repeat myself. â€|Or are you suggesting the Shinsengumi can't handle this?"
"No! No, of course not! It's justâ€|if I stay here, and I cause trouble for you guys, thenâ€|"

>"Well, what proof do you have that these two can keep you a secret

any better than we can? Even if he wasn't after you, that bastard'd be an enemy of ours. If we've got the same enemies, makes sense to me that we'd stick together."
He was gruff as ever, but it wasn't hard to understand what he was trying to sayâ€|
>"Soâ€|I can stay?"
His expression softened.
>"What the hell kind of question is that? If you were as much of a pain in the ass as you seem to think, I would've kicked you out a long time ago."
Relief flooded out across my body.
>"Th-Thank you so much!"
With war set to break out at any time, the Shinsengumi was changing. I didn't know how useful I could be to them once battle was joined, but even so, Hijikata had told me it was okay to stay.

â€|
>"*Sigh* So, you've turned me down again then, have you?"
Sen looked at me with a slightly sad smile as I walked her and Kimigiku out of the meeting room.
>"â€|I'm sorry. It was very vice of you to offer, thoughâ€|"
"Oh, it's all right. If you're so determined to stay, then what could I ever hope to do?"
>She paused and seemed to be checking if Kimigiku was listening.
"â€|There was one other tiny little thing I wanted to ask you. When you told me before that you were, ah, interested in someone, did you perchance mean Hijikata?"
>"What? Umâ€|"
I wasn't quite sure how to answer that question.

>"Umâ€|uhâ€| Well, to be honest, I don't really know Hijikata that well, butâ€|"
I stumbled over my words, not quite sure how to explain to her how I felt, perhaps because I wasn't quite sure myself.
>"The men call him the Demon, because he's so strict and harsh with the soldiers. A lot of people think that he doesn't care about anyone, and that he's cold, but I think he has a kind heart in there. He has a lot of responsibilities, and the whole Shinsengumi rides on his back. i don't think he has any choice but to act like thatâ€| I don't know what I can do for him, but i want to stay here and do whatever I can."
Sen had been nodding encouragingly and making "hm"s of agreement, but now she suddenly burst out laughing.

>"Well, I daresay he has captured you quite thoroughly."
"â€|What?"
>"They say that my ancestor, Suszuka Gozen, fell in love with a human by the name of Tamuramaro Sakanoue, and followed him to the capital. â€|I am, in fact, their granddaughter. So I suppose I know something of how you feel. Circumstance and rank mean little before the power of love."
"What? Wait, wha?! L-L-Love? Iâ€|I didn'tâ€|! I never meant-!"
>She only rested her hand on my shoulder and continued.
"You may be two different creatures-human and demon-but do not think that means your love is doomed to failure. Best of luck to you, Chizuru. I shall be cheering for you!"
>"â€|My lady, we should go."
"Oh. Yes, yes, you're right. Then I must take my leave, dear Chizuru. Do take care. You mustn't underestimate Kazama. He is terribly powerful."
>"A-All right. Thank you. Goodbyeâ€|"
In mere moments, they were gone.
>Circumstance and rank mean little before the power of loveâ€|
But was this thing I felt; the desire to be close to Hijikataâ€| Was it really love?
>I just wanted to be around him, and help himâ€|
Besides, the most

important thing to Hijikata was the Shinsengumi. He'd built it up from nothing, and put everything he was into it.
>With war against Satsuma and Choshu brewing, he hadn't the time to think of anything else.
That being the case, as someone under the care of the Shinsengumi, I needed to think of how I could best put my own skills to use.

â€|

>Just before the beginning of the new year, Okita's condition worsened. It was determined that he had contracted pulmonary tuberculosis.
It was not an uncommon disease, but it was incurable.
>I'd suspected that he might be seriously ill when he began to lose his strength, but I'd never guessed that tuberculosis was the cause.
The entire Shinsengumi was shocked and saddened by the news.

â€|

>Kyoto was still on high alert.
The Shinsengumi remained on standby at the Fushimi magistrate's office through the year-end celebrations.
>My hope that tempers would calm and the threat of war would fade lasted until three days after the new year.
A dispute arose between the Satsuma Domain and a group of shogunate troops attempting to enter Kyoto. Violence broke out, and suddenly, war was upon us.

>The shogunate army in Kyoto numbered roughly 15,000 men, while the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance commanded only 5,000.
Victory for the shogun should have been a forgone conclusion.

>The Satsuma and Choshu, however, had bet their very livelihoods on this war, and determination and morale were high.
Perhaps more importantly, the Satsuma had faced the British in battle, and the Choshu had faced the British, French, and Dutch. Both domains had learned modern Western tactics.

>Armed only with swords against the Satsuma and Choshu's rifles, the Shinsengumi were at a tremendous disadvantage.
During the war, the Fushimi magistrate's office was set on fire, and the Shinsengumi had no choice but to retreat from Kyoto.

â€|

>"*Pant* *Pant* *Pant*"
Inoue glanced at me in concern as we rushed through the city.

>"Are you all right? Perhaps you should rest."
"N-No, I'm fine. We can't afford to stop. I'll be all right."

>I wiped the sweat from my brow, took a deep breath, and forced my throbbing feet to move.
We were on our way to Yodo Castle, under orders from Hijikata.

>The Shinsengumi was doing poorly, so we'd been dispatched to bring reinforcements.
"Do they really think the people at Yodo will help us out?"

>Inoue gave me a somewhat grim smile.
"They have to. We need the help. â€|And so does Hijikata. He can't lose. I never want to see him like that againâ€|"

I remembered the battle at Fushimi all too clearlyâ€|

flashback

On the evening of the third day of the new year, the war began. Cannons pounded the Fushimi magistrate's office, and the ground shook

with each impact.

>"Hijikata!" shouted Harada over the explosions. "We can't take any more of this! That cannon up on the hill is tearing us apart!"
He closed his eyes in frustration.

>"If we try and go up there, their guns will mow us down before we even get close."
Saito seemed to agree.

>"Their rifles have impressive range, and the gunners are skilled. One out of every two shots find its mark, despite the distance."
Harada glanced around the room. His face paled slightly.

>"Where's Shinpachi? I can't find him."
Hijikata glanced at him.

>"He took fifteen men from the 2nd Division to attack the enemy line."
Harada stared at him in shock.

>"Attack the enemy line?! Is he insane?! He's gonna die out there!"
Hijikata said nothing, seeming suddenly sick.

>I could see muscles working in his jaw. His face was pale, although whether from fear of tension I couldn't tell.
Outside, the roar of the cannons continued unabated.

>Just when it seemed certain that Nagakura must have perished-
"Hey guys! I'm back!"

>"Shinpachi!" shouted Hijikata.
Cries of surprise filled the room.

>Hijikata seemed to be debating whether or not Nagakura was a ghost.
"Y-You're alive?!"

>Nagakura smirked at him.
"What, do I look like a ghost? Go ahead and touch me if you don't believe it."

>He grinned as he wiped a thick smear of blood and dirt from his face.
"Anywayâ€¦ It's impossible to bet to the enemy line. Some Aizu guys went on ahead of us, but they got pushed back too."

>"â€¦Commander," said Shimada, "There's nothing else we can do. Please, order the retreat."<p>

Hijikata's brow furrowed, and he scowled furiously.

>"Whoaâ€¦" started Harada. "What's this? Where's this smoke coming fromâ€¦?"
Nagakura narrowed his eyes in anger.

>"The cannon must've set the building on fire! We need to get out of here or we're dead! Hijikata, we have to retreat!"
Even Nagakura's plea seemed to fall on deaf ears.

>Inoue frowned at his commander.
"Toshiâ€¦"

>Until this moment, the Shinsengumi had never known defeat in battle, but they were helpless against the firearms of the Satsuma and Choshu.
The Shinsengumi was Hijikata's life. Defeat wasâ€¦hard to accept.

>After what seemed like an eternity, he let out a long, ragged sigh.
"â€¦I guess this is the end. Nobody can win a war with swords and spears anymore."

>His knuckles turned white.
There were several more minutes of tense, breathless silence before he finally looked up, his eyes burning with fury.

>"We're pulling back. But we haven't lost. They'll pay for this."
Fury wasn't the only thing in those eyes: Behind them I could see a bitter, desperate agony.

end flashback

"I've been with him for a long time," said Inoue, "I know how hard it was for the man to admit we had to retreat."

>He gazed up at the sky.
"One loss is enough. I'm not nearly as

good a swordsman as Kondou-

>"What?! No, don't say-"
He interrupted me with a kind smile and continued.

>"But there are still ways for me to be of use to the Shinsengumi. So let's keep our hopes up, shall we?"
"Okay"

>The Shinsengumi, and Kondou and Hijikata, needed my help. I had to do whatever I could.
It took us several hours to reach Yodo Castle.

>Hijikata's hope was to use the castle as a new staging area where he could garrison our troops and launch ambushes from.

Unfortunately
>"That's weird. Why are the gates closed? Do you think they're already preparing for battle?"

>There were no guards outside the castle or indeed anywhere we could see. It was uncomfortably quiet.
Inoue's current expression was one of grim intensity.

>"No"
He stood for a moment, absently rubbing his chin in thought, before finally making a decision.

>"We are here on the orders of the shogun! We have come to request your help in battle against the rebels who would dare challenge this country's rightful rulers!"
His voice echoes out through the stillness, but no one responded.

>I had almost begun to think the castle was simply abandoned, when-
"Oh, look! There's someone in that window! Huh? They've got something shiny-"

>"Get down!"
"Huh?"

>Inoue grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me down just as gunshots echoed from the castle walls.
My eyes darted around, but there were no rebels nearby. That meant that the bullets were meant for us.

>"W-What's going on?! I thought the Yodo were friendly!"
Inoue gave a heavy sigh.

>"Either they've already been overrun by the rebels, or they don't want to ally with the side they think is going to lose. We need to get back to the men. It's dangerous to stay here."
"B-But Hijikata told us to get reinforcements from Yodo!"

>Inoue only shook his head.
"It's clear by now that they're no longer our allies. The longer we stay here, the more danger I put you in."

>"But if we leave, then what's going to happen to Hijikata? What's going to happen to the Shinsengumi?! L-Let's just try to talk to them! If we explain what's going on, I'm sure they'll understand!"
I'd never seen Inoue glare at me before.

>"That is enough! I want to go back to Toshi with reinforcements as much as you do!"
I felt myself wilt under his anger.

>"But my job here was twofold: To ask for reinforcements, and to protect you."
His glare lessened slightly.

>"If something happens to you now, then I will have failed him twice. Now come on."<p>

There was nothing I could say.

>Inoue had fought alongside Hijikata since their first days in Edo, before the Shinsengumi.
He had undoubtedly felt even more devastated by Yodo's betrayal than I had, but he had still chosen to retreat so that he may protect me.

>Never before had I felt so ashamed and so helpless.
There was nothing I could do.

â€|

>"I'm sorryâ€| Iâ€| I'm uselessâ€| I failedâ€|"
Tears welled up in my eyes and I brushed them away roughly.

>Inoue gave me a kind smile I didn't feel I deserved.
"Don't worry about it. After all, this is Toshi we're talking about. I'm sure he'll come up with some amazing plan and turn this whole thing around."

>He laid his hand on my shoulder and gave it a gentle, reassuring squeeze.
I focused on the warmth of his hand, and felt myself begin to calm down.

>"â€|Your hand is warmâ€| It reminds me of when my father used to pat me on the head when I was a little girl."
Inoue's face wrinkled as he laughed.

>"Ha ha haâ€| Father, huh? I guess if I'd had a daughter, she would be your age right about nowâ€|"
I blinked and then frowned.

>"Ohâ€|I'm sorryâ€| Did I say something wrong?"
He smiled at me and slowly shook his head.

>"Oh no, no. Not at all. I would have been honored to have a daughter like you. Now, we should be going. I'm sure the men we left behind will be worried if we aren't back soon."
"Okay!"

â€|

>"Whatâ€|"
We were nearly to the location where we'd left the rest of the soldiers, but something felt...wrong.

>"Weren't they supposed to be here? Did we get lost?"
Inoue shook his head.

>"No, we couldn't have. It should be just up aheadâ€|"
Then, as we rounded the corner, I noticed something lying on the groundâ€|

>"I-Inoue! There's someone over there!"
"Noâ€|impossible. The rebels couldn't have gotten here alreadyâ€|"

>I looked more closely.
"He's wearing Shinsengumi blues! Could heâ€|?!"

>Inoue narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice.
"â€|Stay quiet. We don't want to give ourselves away."

>I nodded.
Could the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance already have troops here? If they did, they were hiding them very well; neither Inoue nor I could sense anyone nearby.

>No rebelsâ€|but no Shinsengumi either.
"Ah!" Then we came around another bend in the road and I gasped.

>Warriors in the blue jackets of the Shinsengumi were piled up along the road, dead where they'd fallen.
And standing in the middle of this carnageâ€|

>"I thought these men looked familiar. You are here."
Kazama's smile was a cruel, mocking thing.

>"Y-You! Why?!"
I was so furious I could barely speak.

>"To see what the Yodo Domain had decided to do. It seems following tedious politics has at last paid off. â€|I never thought I might find you."
I felt his eyes on me, like those of a snake staring down its prey, before they shifted to take in the dead men that littered the ground around him.

>"I thought they might entertain me until you returned, but they weren't even skilled enough to do that."<p>

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Inoue shake with rage.

>Most of the men who lay dead on the ground in front of us were members of his 6th Division.
And now, because I had chosen to stay with the Shisengumi, Kazama had returned and Inoue's men were dead.

>Kazama had taken their lives, and for what?
"I was otherwise engaged during our last encounter, Chizuru, but this time, you will be leaving with me."

>"Ah!"
Kazama had demonic powers that put him in a class above any mortal man.

>Two skilled swordsmen, working in concert, might be able to hold him back, but not defeat him. Inoue and I would not be able to defeat him, nor, I suspected, would he allow us to escape.
If I surrendered to him, however, then he might let Inoue leave.

>I stepped forward and steeled myself.
Inoue put a hand out to stop me.

>"Stay back."
He then moved forward to put himself between me and Kazama.

>I blinked at him.
"I-Inoueâ€¦? What are you doing?"

>"I'm sorry, but you'll have to run for it. Get back to headquarters, and tell Toshiâ€¦â€¦Tell him that I apologize for my incompetence, and that I hope he will forgive me for not staying with him to the end. Tell him that I don't have the words to thank him for giving a man like me the chance to be a part of something. I'll never forget what he did for me."
"No! I can't do that! I won't just leave you here to die!"

>I choked out a sob, and blinked away sudden tears.
"This man is after me! If I go with him, then you can live! Please!"

>Inoue's smile was bitter.
"Well, well. Are you suggesting I should use a girl for a shield so that I can escape? How could I call myself a warrior, then? Besidesâ€¦ What parent wouldn't lay down their life to protect their child? No father wants to see his daughter die before he does."

>"But-!"
Inoue had finished talking, though. He turned his back to me and drew his sword.

>Suddenly I remembered the conversation we'd had on the way back from Yodo Castle.
He'd told me that he was old enough to have a daughter my age.

>No, cried to myself, that doesn't mean he has to do this! How could he throw his life away?!
"Please, Inoue! Run!"

>I screamed and pleaded, but his back didn't move.
"...Finished with your farewells?"

>Kazama smiled.
"Then I'll give you a chance to take her up on her offer. Go on. Run."

>He let his hand fall from the hilt of his undrawn sword.
"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

>Inoue launched himself at Kazama, and swung his sword down in a wide arc toward the demon's neck.
"Heh."

>Kazama's sword slithered out of its scabbard, too fast for the eye to follow.
His hand simply blurred, and the tip of his blade emerged from Inoue's back.

>"Arrrrrgh!"
Blood bubbled out between his lips.

>"Inoue!"
He fell to his knees, the deep red stain rapidly devouring the light blue of his jacket.

>Kazama's eyes flickered like sparks, and he bent down to whisper to Inoue.
"Is something the matter, human? Aren't the men I just slaughtered your subordinates? Don't you want to take revenge for them? I understood warriors put great stock in avenging the deaths of their comrades-in-arms."

>Inoue glared back at him with white hot rage, and leapt to his feet.
"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

>He lashed out furiously at the demon, blood splattering onto the ground beneath him.
"Hehâ€¦"

>Kazama simply laughed, and stepped easily around Inoue's swinging sword.
I didn't even see him strike.

>There was only the momentary flicker of sunlight on a blade, and blood erupted from a gash across Inoue's chest.
"My apologies, I may have hit a little too hard."

>"Gaaah!"
Inoue ground his teeth, trying desperately to overcome the pain, and turned his strained gaze on to me.
>"What are you doing?! Run!"
Droplets of blood flew from his mouth as he cried out, and his face was already waxy pale.
>I scrambled to my feet, and turned to leave-
"My, my! Of all the humans I've fought, you are, by far, the weakest. Why would the Shinsengumi allow someone so pathetic among their ranks, I wonder? Though I suppose they are rather eccentric."
>I felt something inside me snap.
"S-Stop! Don't-!"
>As I cried out, I heard the awful sound of steel slicing through flesh.
Time slowed to a crawl, and I could do nothing but watch as Inoue fell, without a cry, to the ground.
>"I-Inoue! Inoue!"
Even as part of my mind screamed at me to run, I scrambled toward him, grabbing for his hand.
>It was still warm
A warmth like my father's
>But Inoue's eyes no longer saw. His ears no longer heard. He had joined his men among the corpses on the road.
"Now, this pest is dealt with. There is no one else to save you. Come."
>He flicked his sword clean and slid it back into its scabbard.
Then he stepped forward, and reached for my hand.

>Inoue had told me to run.
Hijikata needed to hear his last words, and I was in no position to fight a demon.
>I knew all this, and I could hear a part of my mind screaming at me to run, but the roaring flames of rage drowned it out.
How could I have let him die to protect me?! Inoue was so kind
>Just looking at his lifeless body sprawled in the dirt made my heart feel as though it would shatter into a thousand pieces.
But more than anything, I hated Kazama for killing my friend as if he was nothing more than an irritating insect!
>I grabbed desperately for my Kodachi, and pulled it from its scabbard, bringing it up into an attack position.
"I thought you were smarter than this! But I see now your time with the humans has poisoned your mind. You disappoint me."
>"Shut up!"
Hot tears rolled down my cheeks.
>"Why are you so upset? Does it bother you that I swatted this fly? He was a human, and he was foolish enough to challenge a demon. What other outcome could there have been?"
"Shut up! Shut...UP!"

>Never in my life had I spoken to someone like that. But never in my life had I so wanted to kill someone.
If only I had been able to transform my wrath into strength, I would have been the strongest creature alive.
>"You! I can never forgive you for what you've done!"
Please Inoue, give me the strength to strike him down!
>I tightened my grip on my sword, my knuckles white, and leapt toward Kazama with a yell.
"Ah!"
>Contemptuously, he slapped my strike aside. My kodachi flew out of my hands and clattered to the ground. I reached out to grab it again-
"Aaaaah!"
>Kazama's foot came down on my arm, and pain shot through it.
"Enough of this stupid game."
>His red, arrogant eyes burned into mine.
The eyes of the monster who had killed Inoue.
>"You do not seem to understand who your master is. That is unfortunate. Perhaps I should punish you, so that you will never defy me again."
I felt the cold steel of his sword on my throat.

>"Pain is an excellent tool for discipline. Fortunately your body heals very quickly."
"Damn you!"

>I glared at Kazama with all the anger I could muster, but all I got in return was a cruel smile.
Inoue had told me to runâ€|
>But I hadn't, and now I couldn't. Kazama was right about one thing: I couldn't escape from him.
If I couldn't escape, then at least I could refuse to give him the satisfaction of a compliant victim!

>"If all you're going to do is use me however you like, then I might as well bite off my tongue and drown in my own blood!"
"Oi! Don't remember giving you permission to do that. And I don't much care for people who can't follow orders."

>The moment I heard that voice, my head suddenly cleared.
There was no way I could mistake itâ€| It wasâ€|

>"Hijikata!"
I felt tears spring to my eyes again, but for a very different reason.

>This was no dream; no hallucination.
Toshizo Hijikata stood in front of me.

>"Dammitâ€| I had a feeling you guys were in trouble, butâ€|"
He stopped as his voice was about to crack, and simply looked at

>Inoue's body, his face twisted with grief and regret.
Hijikata's jaw tightened, and his breath shook as if he were about to cry. I knew what I was about to say would hurt him, but he had to hear itâ€|

>"I-Inoue wanted me to tell you somethingâ€| He said that heâ€|wanted to apologize for his incompetence. And he hoped you would forgive him for not staying with you until the endâ€|"
There was a lump in my throat and my eyes burned, but I had to keep goingâ€|

>"He said he didn't have the words to thank you for giving a man like him the chance to be a part of something, and thatâ€|that he'd never forget what you did for him!"
As I choked out the final words, I began to sob.

Hijikata said nothing.

>Slowly, almost as if in prayer, he bowed his head.
When he lifted it again, his eyes were changed; they shone now with the brilliant fires of rage.

>With tight, deliberate purpose, he gripped his sword, the Izuminokami Kanesada. It whispered through the air as he raised it to an attack stance.
"â€|Another human who wishes to throw his life away? It is difficult for me to understand why your kind is so anxious to die. I was hoping I'd seen the last of this idiocy. Very well. Let's get this over with."

>Kazama's voice was bored, but as he spoke the fire in Hijikata's eyes grew into a raging furnace.
"'Throw away his life,' you piece of shit?! How dare you say he threw his life away!"

>Hijikata roared in wordless fury and launched himself toward Kazama.
With all of his weight behind the blade, he struck at the demon's neck.

>"Nn!"
Kazama flicked his sword up to catch Hijikata's.

>For a moment, it looked as though they were evenly matched-
And then Kazama was thrown back!

>"What?!"
From the look on his face, it was likely the first time he'd ever found himself overpowered by a human, and he was stunned.

>Hijikata didn't let that opening go to waste.
He pushed forward, his sword hissing back and forth through the air as if possessed.

>"Guh!"
Just moment ago Kazama's face had been calm and serene-now it was warped with frustration and surprise.

>Hijikata, by contrast, wore a manic grin and his blade slammed again

and again into Kazama's with more strength than I'd ever seen before.
"â€|I never though I would show this form to a mere human. Be honored, mortal. The moment your eyes behold a true demon is the moment of your death."

>And with that, the battle changed.
"Gah!"

>Kazama's sword hummed and flickered through the air with ease, far faster and smoother than it had been a minute before.
It was all Hijikata could do to anticipate and block his strikes, leaving him no time to try and land an offensive blow of his own.

>"Where's the fire you had a moment ago?! Is this the most you can muster for the dead insect?"
Kazama's demonic strength and endurance were beginning to show: He wasn't even breathing hard.

>"Damn!"
Hijikata, however, was quickly running short of breath. All Kazama had to do was wait for him to tire, andâ€|

>"Goddammit!"
He threw his full strength behind his sword, and lunged at Kazama one more time.

>The demon anticipated his blow easily, and twisted to the side as Hijikata's blade swept past him.
"Gah!"

>Kazama's hand snapped out and Hijikata's sword fell, clattering, to the ground.
"Hijikata!"

>In my mind's eye, I could already see him, crumpling to the dirt, just as Inoue had done. A slow puddle of blood growing under his still-warm bodyâ€|
I had to do something! I couldn't let him die too!

>â€|But I was utterly and completely helpless.
Useless.

Hijikata fell to his knees, his chest heaving.

>Sweat rolled down his forehead in streams, and the cloth of his shirt was soaked.
Kazama lifted his sword and pointed it at Hijikata.

>"â€|This is the end for you."
His mouth curved up into a cold, confident smile.

>"Humans are such fools. They will try to fight what they know they cannot defeat. I call that recklessness, not courage. You have underestimated the power of a demon, and chosen not to fear us. I hope your last thoughts are of shame at your ignorance."
As Kazama spoke, Hijikata dragged his tired body across the ground, toward his fallen sword.

>"What's this? Trying to run?"
Hijikata had reached his sword.

>With the last ounce of strength he possessed, he lifted it up once again and turned to face his foe.
"â€|You won't bow, will you? I've made a fool of you, and yet you refuse to acknowledge the difference between us."

>â€|No.
Hijikata was not the sort of man to care about a difference in strength, but neither was he the sort of man that would simply abandon victory.

>So why, then, had he not responded?
As I watched, he pulled out something from inside his shirt.

>"Ah!"
A tiny bottle filled with red liquid.

>"The Water of Life, eh? How far do you mean to take this idiocy?"
Hijikata replied with a toothy grin.

>"I'm an idiot, huh? Like I give a shit what you think. We were always a pack of idiots. We shared an idiot's dream that we were all too bullheaded to give up on. And now, here we are. We're halfway up the hill. If we stumble now, we're gonna fall all the way back down."
Kazama seemed amused by this.

>"Even if you become a fury, you'll be nothing more than a faded

reflection of a true demon."
Hijikata's grin never wavered.

>"Well, you never know till you try."
"Hijikata, no!"

>My cries fell on deaf ears.
Hijikata lifted the bottle to his lips and drank.

>"Shut up."
Hijikata's voice rumbled out from the fury, dark and low, like approaching thunder.

>"I've had enough of those fucking cowards in the shogunate and I'm sick of you goddamn demons. So I'm not a real demon? Why the hell should I care? Never once in my whole stinking life have they treated me like a real warrior."
His eyes burned with anger.

>"But hellâ€| Where are you supposed to find a real warrior these days? Lotta men callin' themselves 'samurai' when all they do is sit behind ten feet of stone in a castle and get fat. Only thing those sons of bitches care about is making sure the side they buddy up to is the side that's gonna win. We're better soldiers than any of those bastards!"
Hijikata's words weren't just for Kazama any moreâ€|

>They were for Inoue, who had died in a fight he couldn't win; for the shogunate and the counselors, who didn't have the courage to make difficult decisions; and for everyone who had ever refused to treat the Shinsengumi as true warriors.
"I believe what I believe. Nothing can change that. And I will never, ever, retreat. That's what's brought us this far. Call us face if you want, but if we push hard enough and don't give up, eventually we become what we say we are. If I can defeat you now, as a fury, then I-no, then we-can become real demons. Right?"

>The predatory grin on Hijikata's face wasn't human.
When he leapt at Kazama, he moved so fast that I could barely even see him. He'd been impressive as a human, but as a furyâ€|he was beyond belief.

>"Gah!"
Kazama smashed aside the first attack, but the second followed it almost immediately, and then a third.

>Blow after blow crashed against his defenses, giving him no time to even breathe.
"C'mon! That all you've got?! I thought we were just ants for you to crush! Where's your smart mouth now, demon?!"

>Hijikata's eyes flashed, like a great beast closing in on its prey, and he lunged at Kazama.
"Hnnng!"

>With an effort, he managed to swing his blade up in time to catch Hijikata's, but he'd lost the advantage of casually superior strength.
"Gaaaah!"

>His sword rebounded from Hijikata's strike, and Kazama was forced back.
Hijikata leapt for the opening.

>"Argh!"
Hijikata's sword moved too fast for the eye to see: A line of blood simply appeared on Kazama's face.

>He clapped a hand to it in surprise and pain, and jumped backward, trying to put space between them.
"Ah hahahaâ€| Great. Looks like you're finally getting into it. You look like a man now. How's it feel to get cut by a fake?!"

>Kazama didn't even seem to hear Hijikata's words-he simply stared, eyes wide, at the blood that fell from his face to pool in his hand.
Even as I watched, his wounds closed themselves. The stream of blood slowed to a trickle and then stopped.

>"Damn you!"
Though the wound itself had disappeared, it seemed the ramifications had not.

>"How dare you! False demon! Insect! scum! How dare you draw my blood!"
It must have been the first time he'd ever been wounded by a human.

>Kazama's preternaturally calm face was distorted now by rage and

disgust. It was the first time I had ever seen him truly look like a demon.
>"I will never forgive you for this! I will torture you until you beg for death! You will learn what it truly means to feel pain!"

>"At last we get to see the real Kazama. Fine. Come at me. I dare you to kill me."
>He bared his teeth in a wicked smile.

>Their swords collided with a resounding crash.
>"Gaaaah!"

>Kazama had been strong before, but now his blows landed with all the strength of a cannon.
>Veins stood out on Hijikata's neck and forehead as he strained against the onslaught.

>"Damn you! You are nothing! Not even a shadow of a demon! How dare you draw my blood!"
>Kazama had gone mad with rage, his golden eyes wide and bloodshot.

>"Bastard!"
>Every time their swords met, I could see Hijikata's chip and shake. It looked as if the next blow could break it in two.

>Hijikata tried desperately to block with the back of the blade, and protect it from more damage, but Kazama's strikes were too quick and too powerful.
>Hatred rolled off of them in waves. Neither of them would be satisfied with simply killing the other.

>"I'll never forgive you, you arrogant son of a bitch! You're going to hell even if I gotta drag you there myself!"
>His clothes were soaked with blood, but eyes alight with vigor and determination shone out from beneath his white hair.

>"Ha! Go to hell if you like, but you'll be going alone!"
>They leapt at each other like enraged animals, blows flying so quickly that they could only defend or attack on instinct.

>It was clear that the battle would only end when one of them was dead, but it was rapidly becoming clear that Hijikata was fighting in a way that put him at a disadvantage.
>"Ah!"

>Back home, he'd always been so calm, even in the heat of battle, but cool detachment he fled with his humanity.
>I had to stop them. If I didn't, Hijikata would die, but awe and terror at their display of violence and skill had sealed my voice in my throat.

>Even though I was a demon, just like Kazama, I was helpless.
>It was maddening.

>"Yukimura!"
>I heard footsteps pounding along the path and spun around to find the source of that familiar voice.

>"The commander left to go see how things had gone with the Yodo, and he hasn't returned. Have you seen him?"
>"Yamazaki!"

>His timing couldn't have been better. In that moment, Yamazaki looked like an angel.
>"We're in trouble! Hijikata's fighting a demon and Inoue is!"

>I wanted to explain what had happened, but somewhere between my brain and my mouth it got all jumbled and I found myself stammering unintelligibly.
>Yamazaki stared at me for only a moment before he glanced past my shoulder and saw the battle raging there. His eyes widened in shock and horror.

>"What's going on here?"
>That white-haired demon! Is that a fury?"
>"Those clothes, they're-! Oh my god!"

>Realization began to dawn on his face, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the battle.
>"That's...that's Hijikata! He drank the Water of Life!"

>"!"
>"Hng!"

>With a dull twang, the sword leapt out of Hijikata's hands and clattered to the ground.
>"This battle is mine. Though I am impressed that you lasted so long with such a dull sword."

>He gave Hijikata a tight smile.
>"Guh!"

>Hijikata kept low to the ground, and slowly began to move

away.
Kazama followed just as slowly, his grin widening at Hijikata's apparent fear.

>"I hope you haven't forgotten that I don't intend to simply kill you. Eventually you'll die, of course, but not before I've inflicted on you all the pain I can imagine."
The advantage once again his, Kazama's calm had returned.

>"Ah, I know. When I'm finished, I'll skin you alive and send your head back to your beloved Shinsengumi, preserved in alcohol. They deserve to see you at your, ah, best. To start, though, I think I'll take off your arms, then feed them to stray dogs!"
Kazama hefted his sword, its blade still clean and undamaged.

>"Hijikataaaa!"
I screamed as loud as I could, some irrational part of me hoping that might change the outcome.

>A horrible, wet sound filled my ears.
"What?!"

>I looked up-
Blood had splattered across the front of Kazama's shirt, but Hijikata was unharmed.

>"What are you doing, Commander?! You are the mind of the Shinsengumi! We're your arms and legs! Why are you running off to face the enemy alone?"
Hijikata stared down in pained shock.

>"Yamazaki, what are you saying?"
His voice shook.

>Yamazaki smiled back, his eyes shining as I's seen them do when he and Hijikata were discussing important secrets.
"If you lose an arm or a leg, you can always replace it. But if you lose the head, you lose everything. The Chief and the Commander They two of you make a whole"

>With that he went limp, the last of his energy exhausted, and crumpled to the ground.
Blood pooled beneath him, turning the packed dirt a deep red.

>"Yamazaki!"
I grabbed a hold of him, as if that might somehow bring him back to consciousness.

>"Yamazaki Why?" Hijikata's hair had slowly begun to shift back to its original color, and as I watched he struggled to blink back tears.
"Hey, Hijikata! Yamazaki! Gen! Where are you guys?!"

>Nagakura's voice echoed through the forest from some distance away.
"Dammit! I should just finish you off now-!"

>Kazama lifted his sword and made to swing it down when, out of nowhere, a hulking form appeared between us.
"Stop. Any further battles will only lead to unnecessary casualties."

>Amagiri.
"Are you ordering me to retreat?! Am I supposed to let this worm who dared to cut my face simply go free?!"

>"Killing him would be easy enough for you, but to do so would go against the wishes of the Satsuma Domain. Ultimately they desire for the shogunate to fall by their hand, not the hand of a demon."
His tone made it clear how little he thought of that desire, but his commitment to obedience was clearly greater.

>Kazama wasn't pleased with Amagiri's interruption, but he seemed to feel that it was pointless to argue over the matter with his fellow demon.
"Hijikata, was it? I will not forget that name. I will have my revenge."

>"Same to you. I won't be able to sleep at night until I've sent your soul to the afterlife."
They glared at one another with such hate I felt as if they might spontaneously combust.

>Then Kazama spun on his heel and followed Amagiri off into the forest.
No sooner had they disappeared

>"Hey, there you- Hijikata, what the hell's going on?"
"There's dead men all over the place Did you run into some rebels? No,

those are sword cutsâ€|"

>Hijikata glanced at his fallen friend and then at his
ninja.
"â€|Go look at Yamazaki. I think he's still alive."

>"What?!"
Nagakura stared in horror and sudden realization at
Yamazaki's limp body.

>"What happened here?! C'mon, Yamazaki, hang in there! Anybody got
some clean cloth?! And booze! Anything alcoholic's good!"
"Here,
if you need cloth take this. He needs it more than I do."

>"Thanks, Sano!"
"I-I'll help too! Let me look at himâ€|"

>I desperately called up everything I could remember about first aid,
and set to work next to Nagakura and Harada.
"â€|Commander, what
happened here?"

>Hijikata didn't ever seem to hear the voice of Saito.
"â€|Iâ€|I
never thought I would sacrifice my own men so that I could
surviveâ€|"

>Saito's eyes widened.
"Sacrificeâ€|?"

>"Inoue's body is over there. Can you give me a hand burying him? His
men tooâ€|"
With that he finally looked at Saito and gave him a
pained smile.

>"It gets cold this time of year. Can't leave 'em out there to
freezeâ€|"
I knew that he wanted to break down and cry more than
any of us, but in front of his men he struggled to grin and joke.

>It was just too much. I felt myself begin to sob, but I couldn't
bear to do it in front of Inoue and Yamazaki, so I buried my face in
my hands and let the tears flow soundlessly.
Inoue had given his
life to save mine.

>Hijikata had become a fury to fight the demon who'd chased me across
Kyoto.
Yamazaki had taken a blow that might well end his life to
protect Hijikataâ€|

>â€|What could I possibly do for them?
How could I atone for my
sins?

>I thought about it for a long time, but no answers came.<p>

â€|

>That night, Sanan and the Fury Corps launched an attack in revenge
for the events of the afternoon.
Once the sun set, it became
harder to aim a gun, which the Shinsengumi hoped would give the Fury
Corps the advantage.

>At first it did, and the furies were even more successful than
they'd hopedâ€|
But then the gunners began to fire different,
special bullets, and the Fury Corps were quickly driven back.

>The loss was devastating, and our allies quickly crumbled.
With
the betrayal of the Yodo and Tsu Domains, and the refusal of the
Owari Domain to become involved in any way the Shinsengumi was
alone.

>With our allies gone, and enemies everywhere, we had no choice but
to retreat to Osaka Castle.<p>

â€|

>"*Sigh* â€|Well, here we are. â€|Damn this place is big. What's the
sense in building a place like this?"
"Hijikata, we're gonna take
Yamazaki to see Doctor Ryoujun, okay?"

>"Sure. Fine. Go ahead."
Yamazaki had groaned in pain all the way
homeâ€| I hoped he would be all right.

>I was also worried for Hijikata. Now that he was a fury, being out
in the sunlight had to be painful for himâ€|
"Umâ€|Hijikata? Are
you feeling all right? I meanâ€|physically?"

>"What, surprised to see a fury out during the day?"
"N-Noâ€| I-I

mean, that's not what Iâ€¦ I was just wondering if anything has changed."

>Even if I wasn't directly at fault, he'd become a fury because of the demon I'd attracted.
"No. So far, nothing. Still, pretty soon here it'll probably be real painful for me to even look at the sun. Might as well enjoy it while I can."

>"Oh noâ€¦"
He looked away.

>"I don't know what's going on in that head of yours, but only one person made the decision to drink that stuff. Me."
He glanced back at me.

>"Besides, I've ordered plenty of men to cut themselves open or become furies. Can't really wuss out when it's my turn, can I? â€¦I had a feeling this would happen eventually. Don't blame yourself."<p>

It wasn't that easy, though. I couldn't just take him at his word, and shed all the guilt I felt.

>When I looked up at him though, his expression seemed somehow relieved.
"Umâ€¦this is kind of a weird question, butâ€¦ Did something good just happen?"

>He smiled.
"Of course."

>He looked up at the castle walls and laughed.
"Isn't it obvious? This castle will never fall. So long as we stay here, we can't lose. Maybe we'll do what Yukimura Sanada couldn't. â€¦And maybe I'll get some revenge. How could I not be excited?"

>The man I'd watched fight the demon Kazama was nowhere to be seen: Hijikata's face now was that of a man looking forward, determined to win.
I smiled to myself.

>He hadn't given up hope.
"Commander! There you are!"

>We both looked up to see Shimada standing before us.
"What's wrong?"

>"Umâ€¦ We've been ordered to put to sea immediately. We're returning to Edo."
Hijikata eyes went so wide that he almost appeared afraid.

>"Edo? What do you mean? I thought we were going to stay here and give that rebel scum a little payback."
"Wellâ€¦umâ€¦"

>Shimada hesitated, and I sensed that it was out of reluctance, not confusion.
When he spoke, he sounded as if even he didn't quite believe what he was saying.

>"â€¦I've received word that Yoshinobu Tokugawa has already boarded the ship and is headed for Edo. So there isâ€¦little point in remaining here."
Hijikata looked very much like he wanted to throw up.

For a moment, he simply stood there, stunned.

>When he finally spoke, his voice was a sinister growl.
"What the hell do you mean, he's on a boat to Edo? His army put their necks on the line for him, and he's running away to save his own sorry ass?"

>Shimada swallowed.
"Well, to be honest I'm really not too sure myselfâ€¦"

>He didn't look much more pleased about the situation than Hijikata.
"Dammit!"

>Unable to contain his frustration, he kicked out at the nearest tree.
His eyes thinned and he kicked it several more times.

>At last he stopped, slightly out of breath, and tried to regain his earlier calm.
"â€¦Fine. Not like we were fighting for Tokugawa himself in the first place. They don't have the balls for it, fine. We don't need them. We've still got the Denshu Company, and a couple of those warships the shogunate bought from the foreigners. When we

get to Edo, we'll just have to start this fight up again."
>Perhaps it was the desperate exhilaration of having your back to the wall, but I saw the fire of determination light in Hijikata's eyes.<p>

...
>That was how the Shinsengumi and the last remnants of the old shogunate were forced to leave Osaka Castle and return to Edo.
During the trip, Yamazaki's wound grew worse, and eventually he passed away.
>Yamazaki himself had said that Hijikata was the head, and the rest of the Shinsengumi were his arms and legs.
To me, it seemed, that was truer than even Yamazaki had realized: His death was as painful to Hijikata as the loss of a real limb.
>Yamazaki was buried at sea in a ceremony presided over by Takeaki Enomoto, a one-time vassal of the shogunate who was bound for Edo on the same ship.<p>

15. Chapter 5

(Yay! Hijikata's story finally begins! Sorry for making you all wait so long. Now I was told that I probably shouldn't be doing this story... But I figured how is this any different than the people who upload entire playthroughs on Youtube? Besides when it comes right down to it... Whether you're watching a game or reading about a game it doesn't change the fact that it's never quite as fun as playing it yourself. 'Cause when you play the game you get to immerse yourself in its world in a way you just can't do by watching or reading it. So do I think this'll stop people from buying it? No! It'll probably encourage them to buy it more. I myself own the anime, the psp game and the 3DS game. So just saying...^^)

CHAPTER 5

January 1868

HIJKATA

Upon arriving in Edo, we were forced to live in an inn originally meant for hatamoto. It was located in Shinagawa and was known as the Kama Inn.

>Kondou's shoulder injury and Okita's tuberculosis were both being treated by Doctor Matsumoto at his home.
The Shinsengumi had lost at Toba-Fushimi, retreated from Osaka Castle, and were plagued by doubts as to the allegiance of the shogunate forces and Yoshinobu himself.

>Things were hardly looking good, and the men were tense and worried.
"When's the chief getting back?" said one of the men. "He better not've run away just to save his ass like Yoshinobu."

>"No way, he'd never do that!" said another.
Normally, such insubordination would have earned a harsh reprimand, if not more, but things had changed.

>"Hey, you guys're talking too much," snapped Nagakura. "If you've got time to screw around, how 'bout you go sharpen your swords, huh?"
"Yes, sir! M-My apologies!"

>It wasn't just the tempers of the rank-and-file soldiers that were fraying; Nagakura and the others seemed just as on-edge.
Harada watched the two men scurry off and sighed.

>"...Well, I can see where they're coming from!" As soon as war

broke out, the man at the top was the first to run. That's pretty sad."
Nagakura sighed as well.

>"Maybe, but I meanâ€¦| What else would you expect? Wasn't the man a national loyalist from Mito? He probably just pissed himself once he saw the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance had the imperial battle standard. He can't look like much of a threat from their side of things."
Harada narrowed his eyes.

>"Doesn't matter what your politics are. You turn your back on men who were willing to give their lives for you and there's only one thing you are: a son of a bitch. Those Choshu guys were just inches away from being utterly destroyed, but they risked their lives, didn't give up and they survived. Hell, they practically won. The shogunate, thoughâ€¦| They gave up before they even got in a fight."
Nagakura looked sick.

>"...So what's gonna happen now? Kondou's stuck in bed. Even if we wanted to go up against the Satsuma and the Choshu, swords can't compete with guns. We're screwed."
He sighed and let his shoulders slump.

>So long as the men you lead are willing to fight, you can always raise morale, no matter what weapons they have. But Yoshinobu would rather runâ€¦|
Then what were the Shinsengumi supposed to fight for?

>What were they supposed to do?
"Future's looking pretty dark for usâ€¦| Thinking about it's just making me depressed, though. Maybe we oughta head over to Yoshiwaraâ€¦|"

>Nagakura gave a tired sigh and stretched.
As I looked around the inn, I remembered I hadn't seen Saito for a while.

>I'd heard he'd taken the sick and injured to Doctor Matsumoto's, and he hadn't had time to return yet.
We had to win the next battle.

>I knew they were all doing the best they could already, butâ€¦| When I thought of the peaceful times we'd enjoyed back in Kyoto, they seemed so far away. Sometimes I wondered if they'd happened at all.
But there was one thing that worried me, above all elseâ€¦|

â€¦|

>"...Um, Hijikata, I brought you some tea."
I knocked politely on the door, but he didn't respond.

>"Hijikata, are you thereâ€¦|? I'm going to open the doorâ€¦|"
He was sitting in the back of the room at his desk, writing furiously.

>He gave a heavy sigh.
From time to time he would pause and think for a few moments, then return to writing.

>"Hijikata, I brought your tea."
"Leave it here."

>He didn't even bother to turn around and acknowledge me, and his voice was distant and faint.
As I sat up from setting his tea down, I noticed that he was looking even worse than usual. His face was pale-almost blue-and there were tremendous dark shadows underneath his eyes.

>Hijikata was a fury nowâ€¦|
Being awake and active during the day had to be tortuously difficult for him, but he'd continued to work at such a feverish pace I almost thought he was possessed.

>"Wellâ€¦| I'll be going now. Don't push yourself too hard."
I had made it almost to the door, when we were interrupted.

>"Are you here, Commander?"
Hijikata stopped and glanced toward the open doorway to find Shimada entering the room.

>"Yes. What is it?"
Shimada furrowed his brows in worry.

>"We were supposed to meet with that vassal today, you remember?

Well, I just got word that he's going to give us the brush-off and go

somewhere else."
Hijikata grunted.

>"...No, we need to tak to him. I don't care how. If we can't, we're stuck. I'll go."
And with that he stormed out of the room.

>He'd looked awful when I'd come inâ€| I hoped he'd be all right.
Shimada seemed to have read my mind.

>"Godâ€| Ever since we got to Edo, he's been working non-stop."
He mumbled under his breath, almost impressed, as Hijikata stalked out.

>"He's been visiting some of the shogunate bigwigs, hoping to get support for a rematch against the rebels. The men are starting to wonder when he sleeps, or even if he sleeps."<p>

I didn't find this impressive.

>I knew it wasn't his intent, but Shimada's words hurt. Had Hijikata not been a fury, the the toll on his body would not have been so high.
"Shimada, are you okay? You look like you've lost a little weight tooâ€|"

>He smiled at me but the smile seemed a bit sad.
"Ah, wellâ€| Ever since Yamazaki passed awy, I've got a lot more work to do. â€|But he left it to me, and I'll be damned if I dishonor his memory by messing it up. And after seeing how far the commander's pushing himself for us, it just wouldn't feel right if I just sat around all day, you know?"

>"I supposeâ€| "
I knew how Shimada felt, but he was in a position to actually contribute. There was nothing I could do for Hijikataâ€|

>The day he died, Inoue had told me that while I might not be much help to the Shinsengumi as a warrior, there were other ways that I might be of service.
I'd thought about that every day since Inoue and Yamazaki had died, but I had yet to think of what it was that I could do.

>"Well, I've got plenty more to do, so I'll be on my way."
"Oh, yes, of course. Please be careful."

>"Oh, rightâ€| I've heard there are a lot of killers out on the streets these days; creeps looking to test out their swords on a living body. So you probably shouldn't go out alone at night, all right?"
"Okayâ€|"

>Shimada nodded, then lifted himself heavily to his feet and left.<p>

â€|

>Later that night, I was waiting in the empty common room for the captains to return.
"Evening, Chizuru!"

>"Oh, Heisuke. â€|Where's everyone else?"
"Shin and Sano took the men to Yoshiwara, and left me behind to house-sit."

>He seemed very frustrated by this.
"Manâ€| I'm not a servant, you know? They can't keep giving me this kinda bitch workâ€| â€|Well, I guess it's cool they're acting like they always did. To me, I mean. Like nothing ever changed."

>His laugh sounded small and lonely in the empty hall.
"Oh, that reminds me. Do you know where Sanan is? Did he go somewhere?"

>"Yeah, I heard he's out on patrol."
"Patrol? Butâ€| We're not in Kyoto anymoreâ€| No one's asked us to keep the peace in Edo. Why's he still doing it?"

>Heisuke looked away, his face solemn.
"â€|Sanan's been acting weird lately. Like, just today soon as the sun went down, he told me he was leaving on patrol. I asked if he wanted me to go with him, but he said he'd be fine on his own."

>"Oh. Well, I heard that there have been a lot of killings at night

recently. Maybe he went out to see if he could learn anything about that."
He might not have the same authority that he had in Kyoto, but the Shinsengumi still worked for the shogunate. Perhaps Sanan was simply trying to protect Edo, regardless of whether he'd been asked to or not.

>Heisuke's eyes narrowed.
"â€|Well, if that's the deal, then good."

>He didn't much sound like he thought it was, however.
"Oh! Hijikata! Welcome back."

>"You're still up," he sighed as he entered the room and closed the door.
His face was still pale, but his tone was sharp.

>As I watched, I realized that he was only barely standing. He shook just slightly as he moved, and I got the feeling that if he let his concentration slip even a little, he would simply collapse.
There was something wrong, butâ€|what should I say?

>"Umâ€| Is there anything I can do to help?"
I knew what the answer would be, but I couldn't help asking.

>"â€|No. Just stay put, and stop thinking about that."
Well, that was clear enough.

>"Ohâ€| I see."
Even though everyone else was working themselves to the bone, barely sleeping or eating, all I could do was sit around, useless.

>Hijikata must have seen my face fall, because his frown changed and his brows drew together.
"Heyâ€| Don't gimme that look."

>"Oh! I-I'm sorry!"
The moment I said it I realized I'd only made things worse-an apology only made me sound more miserable.

>No, that wasn't good at all! I needed to be more cheerful, or I'd just drag everyone else down with me. If I couldn't help, the least I could do was try not to hinder.
Hijikata sighed and closed his eyes.

>He then glanced at me with a small smile.
"â€|You don't need to worry about us. Justâ€|go make some tea, all right? Your tea isn't that bad, I guess."

>"O-Okay! I'll be right back!"
I ran off to the kitchen, my mood much improved.

â€|

>Heisuke smirked at his commander.
"Hijikataâ€| You put up a good front, but you're really pretty easy on her."

>Hijikata narrowed his eyes, huffed, and looked away.
"â€|Shut it."

â€|

>"Here you go! I could only find some hard candy to go with the tea, butâ€|"
"Fine," said Hijikata. "I have to get back to work as soon as I dring this anyway."

>Heisuke frowned at him.
"Are you sure you're going to be all right? You're a fury now. You should be sleeping during the day and working at night."

>Hijikata didn't answer. Instead he took a sip of his tea and sat in silence for a moment.
"When we were leaving Osaka Castle, Kondou said something to me."

>He narrowed his eyes.
"He said that if he was the shogun, even if he'd only had two or three hundred men, he'd have locked himself in that castle and fought until he didn't have anyone left. Then he would've gutted himself, like an honorable warrior."

>I didn't know how to respond to that.
Hijikata continued.

>"I told him that it doesn't do anybody any good when the guy on top dies, and it's bad news for everyone on the bottom. I told him he was being to idealistic. â€|Now he's stuck in his bed, shot in the

shoulder. He'd die for any one of us, and we all know it. Sure, I feel like shit, but that doesn't mean I get to rest."
He gave a weak grin.

>"Gotta get things back in order before he gets back."
There was a gleam in his eye-excitement at the thought of handing over a perfectly-functioning Shinsengumi to his master and friend.

>If the rest of the men worried because they saw their chief laid low by a coward's bullet, Hijikata was buoyed by the simple fact that Kondou was alive, and that he had the courage to do what other leaders would not.<p>

â€|

>He finished his tea quickly, and returned to his room with only perfunctory thanks.
The day before, his light had stayed on late into the night. Today would likely be no different.

>Heisuke glanced at me and frowned.
"I've got a bad feeling things are just gonna get worse from here on in. Hijikata's a fury, but it doesn't look like he's started to feel the bloodlust yet."

>"â€|Bloodlust?"
Heisuke's grim expression deepened.

>"When you become a fury, something happens to you, andâ€| Well, sometimes, you really, really want to drink blood. Like, you need to. It hurts, and not like how it hurts when you get beat up during word practice. You want to die, just because that'll make the pain stop."
"Oh no!"

>My hand leapt to my mouth involuntarily.
Hijikata already looked terrible. If unbearable pain were suddenly added to his may burdensâ€|

>"Is there anyway toâ€|do anything about it?"
Heisuke's eyes narrowed.

>"Well, if you drink some blood, then it goes away almost immediately, butâ€| Only for a while. And the longer you go, the more painful it gets. â€|At first, you only need a little blood to feel better, but after a while you need more, and pretty soon you soon you have to drink a whole lot of blood before it goes away."
I was at a loss for words.

>A monster that could only survive by drinking human bloodâ€| It was like something out of a legend.
I glanced back at Heisuke.

>"What about you, Heisukeâ€|? Are youâ€|umâ€|drinking blood?"
His face twitched and he looked away.

>"C'mon, don't ask me that."
He made some manner of excuse after that, then got up and left the common room, leaving me alone to think about Hijikata.

>Was he really okay?
Had he already experienced the bloodlust Heisuke had told me about, but refused to tell anyone?

>He couldn't have been in the throes of it when I saw him, but it was clear that sooner or later he would find himself in a great deal of pain.
He was doing so much for the Shinsengumi. I wanted to do something-anything!-to help ease that pain.

>Wasn't there any way to suppress that desire for blood?!
Then it came to meâ€|my father!

>He had been doing research on the furies. Perhaps he'd left something useful behind at my house. It was already too late to visit, so I resolved to go the next day, and see if I could find anything.<p>

â€|

>The following day, I left a note for anyone who wondered where I'd gone, and headed toward my old house in Edo.
Hijikata had left long before me to meet with several of the members of the shogunate.

>No one had apparently visited the house in several years, and everything was covered in a thin layer of dust.
"Now, where would he keep his fury researchâ€¦ It must be somewhere hiddenâ€¦"
>I brushed some of the dust off a stack of documents, and opened them up. Each one was covered in barely-legible scribbling. It would take me forever to decipher themâ€¦
No, this was nothing compared to what the rest of the Shinsengumi went through. I had to do it!

>"Shootâ€¦ I guess that wasn't it eitherâ€¦"
I sat back on the floor and sighed heavily.
>How foolish I'd been to think I could just waltz into my house, find my father's secret documents, and solve a problem that had haunted the Shinsengumi for years.
â€¦No. I couldn't give up.
>I had to keep trying. Sooner or later, I'd find something.
Hijikata and Heisuke needed my help. I had to find something.
>"Huhâ€¦"
As I flipped open a particularly thick sheaf of papers, a scrap fell out and landed on the floor.
>It appeared to be some kind of formula.
"Is thisâ€¦ about the furies?"
>As I studied it, I realized what I'd found: The paper described a medicine that could suppress the bloodlust of a fury, and help keep them from losing control.
The idea of Hijikata or Heisuke losing control was frightening, but I read on.
>It seemed that my father had returned to Edo just after I'd left for Kyoto. While he was in Edo, he'd mixed up the ingredients for the medicine.
I looked over the instructions. The ingredients he'd used were likely still in the warehouse. With his instructions, I should be able to mix it myselfâ€¦
>And with my father's medicine, I could save Hijikata, Heisuke, and Sanan!
I ran to the warehouse and got to work.

â€¦
>By the time I finished, night had already fallen.
I remembered what Shimada had told me about how many murders there'd been at night lately, and made sure to stick to busy streets as I made my way back to the Kama Inn.
>"Oh!"
Just as I arrived, Sanan and Heisuke were leaving.
>"Um, Sanan!"
"Oh? You're back rather late. It's dangerous out there, you know. You shouldn't be out at night all by yourself."
>I frowned.
"I-I'm sorryâ€¦ I meant to come back earlier but I was so busy and I just kind of lost track of time, andâ€¦ A-Anyway! I've got something for you!"
>I handed Sanan the medicine, which I'd wrapped in a small piece of paper.
"What's this?"
>"It's medicine to suppress the fury bloodlust! I went back to my house today, and found instructions for how to make it! It should make the pain go away."
He didn't smile or say thanksâ€¦ He just sighed.
>He looked down at the paper I'd handed him, then back to me.
He then smiled and said, "â€¦Thank you, but no. Your gesture is appreciated, but not needed."
>I blinked at him.
"Huh? Wait, butâ€¦ Without it youâ€¦"
>His smile faded.
"You are not one of us, so to you the bloodlust might seem odd, or wrong. However, the more one tries to suppress it, the greater the pain becomes. Bit by bit, it will chip away at your sanity. â€¦This medicine would be a minor reprieve; nothing more."
>"B-But-!"
He seemed annoyed now as he turned away.

>"Excuse me. I must leave for patrol. Good night."
"Ah-"
>Before I could protest he was gone, walking briskly down the darkened street.
Without the medicine, what would Sanan do when the bloodlust came?
>â€|Oh no!
I remembered what Kimigiku had said to us, back at the Fushimi magistrate's officeâ€|
>"Then are you aware that the Shinsengumi's furies have been murdering people on the street to test their strength?"
Noâ€| It couldn't be.
>It was the Shinsengumi's job to protect Kyoto and its citizens.
Surely Sanan wouldn't attack people on the street just to satisfy his thirst for bloodâ€|
>"Hey, Chizuru. I'll take that."
I jumped at the sound of Heisuke's voice. I had nearly forgotten he was there.
>He blinked at me and tried again.
"Can I have it?"
>"Ohâ€|yes, yes of course."
I handed him the packet Sanan had so recently refused.
>He stuffed it into his pocket as he stared off down the street at Sanan's rapidly retreating back.
"I'm going to go on patrol with him. If heâ€|if he does something weird, I'll stop him. So don't worry, all right?"
>I was more transparent than I thought, it seemed.
"All rightâ€|I'm counting on you, Heisuke. Oh, right. Where's Hijikata? Is he back yet?"
>"Yeah, he came back earlier in the evening, but he locked himself in his room and he hasn't poked his head out since."
I frowned.

>"Oh. I'm going to go check on him then."
Heisuke and I said our quick goodbyes, and I made my way into the Kama Inn and up to Hijikata's room.

â€|
>"Hijikata? Are you there? I've got something for youâ€|"
Nothing. I was about to turn away, assuming he was asleep, when-

>"G-Gaah!"
The voice was clearly in pain.
>"H-Hijikata! I-I'm coming in!"
I threw the door open and ran into the room.
>"Guhâ€|gaah!"
He was bent over the top of his desk at the back of the room. Sweat poured down his face, and I could hear his teeth squeak horribly as he gritted them.
>"H-Hijikata! Are you okay?!"
His hair had gone white and his eyes glowed red.
>"You idiot. Just shut up."
"B-But-!"
>"This'll passâ€|any time nowâ€| Don't get all worked up over nothing!"
He wrapped his arms around his shoulders and squeezed until his knuckles turned white as he glared up at me.
>His breaths came out in pants, and he shivered as if he had a fever.
It was Hijikata's personality to refuse to show any pain, or even any emotion at all-or at least to show as little as possible.

>For him to be like thisâ€| The pain must have been unimaginable.
Was this the bloodlust that Heisuke had spoken of? What was I suppose to do?
>If he drank the medicine my father had created for him, then the pain would surely go away, but Sanan had said it would only be a temporary solution.
Thenâ€|
>Should I give him some of my blood?
Would Hijikata even want me to give him my blood?
>What was I going to do?!
There was no time to waste.

>It wasn't the best plan, perhaps, but I couldn't bear to see him in pain any longer.
And besides, at long last I would finally be useful!

>I said nothing, and drew the Kodachi I kept at my waist.
Hijikata's eyes went wide.

>"H-Hey! What the hell is this?!"
I slid my finger along the edge of the blade. I barely even felt it. A bead of thick blood formed over the cut.

>"Please! drink my blood. It'll make you feel better, right?"
An ashamed look swam in his eyes.

>"What the hell?!"
He looked down at the cut.

>"I can't do that!"
His clothes were drenched in sweat, and he shook like a leaf in the wind.

>I couldn't back down. This was my chance to do something for him; to make a difference.
But perhaps most importantly, I just couldn't watch him suffer any more.

>I gave him a kind smile.
"Don't worry about me. Please!"

>His eyes narrowed at me.
He said nothing.

>Though he tried desperately not to, his eyes were drawn to my finger; to the thick, red blood that slowly beaded and dropped.
His teeth ground and his hands flexed, but he couldn't resist.

>It was only moments before he gave in.
He closed his eyes and sighed.

>"! You're an idiot. A girl shouldn't cut herself up. No man's gonna want to marry a girl covered in scars."
He then took my hand and licked the blood from my finger.

>I felt the soft caress of his tongue as it ran the length of the cut, and then the soft pressure of his teeth and lips as he sucked gently, drawing a few more drops out and into his mouth.
"! I-I'll be fine. I'm a demon. I heal really fast."

>He glanced up at me, an odd sort of anger in his eyes.
"Doesn't matter. Demon or not, you're still a girl."

>His breathing had already begun to calm itself; through his hand on my wrist I could feel his shaking subsiding as well.
At last, I thought, I was able to be useful.

>A few moments later, his hand slipped from my wrist. The cut on my finger had already healed.
"! I'm sorry for being so, um, forward!"

>"No!"
He took a quiet breath and shook his head.

>"This isn't the time to be pretending that I'm fine. I know that. If I want to make sure Kondou wins, then I don't have a choice. I have to become a monster."
I didn't know what to say to that. Absently, I touched my fingers to the wrist Hijikata had taken when he drank my blood.

>I almost thought I could still feel his warmth there.<p>

!

>Even after the events of that night, Hijikata pushed himself just as hard as before, and visited the shogunate officials whenever he could find the time.
Eventually, his work began to pay off, and the Shinsengumi were given one of the hatamoto mansions to use as their headquarters.

>I knew he had to be in miserable condition, between his demanding schedule and fury-related difficulties, but he was determined to give Kondou his war.
That thought alone seemed to sustain him and drive him forward.

>Perhaps the gods took pity on him..<p>

!

>"My apologies for worrying you."
It was some time later that Kondou finally made an appearance, seemingly completely healed.
>He frowned as he continued to speak.
"I never thought being kept away from the fighting for so long would be this frustrating. Had our foes forced their way in, I was prepared to fight them, no matter my conditionâ€| But I suppose that's beside the point now."
>A small smile took the place of his frown as he addressed all the men in the room.
"I'm sure you're all wondering what's next. First, we'll head to Koufu. We've been ordered to ambush the Imperial Army."
>His smile broadened.
"The shogunate's given us two cannons, a number of small arms, and funding."
>As he began to lay out the details of the plan, I saw his eyes twinkle with excitement.
In anticipation of their success on this mission, Kondou and Hkijikata had both been given promotions.

>Nagakura and Harada, however, seemed less than pleased with this turn of events.
"Hey, Kondou," started Nakakura. "Who came up with the idea of having us guard Koufu?"
>"It was Awanokami Katsuâ€|" replied Kondou. "Why? Is that a problem?"
"I've heard a lot of rumors about this Katsu guy. And not good stuff. He's famous for being a pacifist. Why would somebody like that give us cannons, and money to go to war?"
>Harada nodded in agreement.
"Besides," he started. "I've heard that the shogun himself is perfectly willing to just go along with whatever the New Government Army wants. You don't think Katsu feels the same way?"
>Kondou frowned.
Then his eyes took on a hard look.
>"Nagakura, Harada, these are direct orders from the shogunate. It's true that the shogun isn't publicly defying the New Government Army, but that's because his situation isn't ideal. However, if we can protect Koufu, then perhaps he'll think that the shogunate actually has a chance to win this war, and he'll put his full resources behind it. This isn't just a matter of winning or losing: The men in charge are recognizing our hard work by saying that we are a force skilled and dedicated enough to defend Koufu. Isn't our duty as warriors, then, to give all we can to this fight? Don't you agree, Nagakura?"
Nagakura narrowed his eyes at his long-time friend.

>"â€|You're really gonna try and gloss over it like that? I'm a captain of the Shinsengumi, but I am not your retainer."
Kondou looked upset, but Harada spoke up before he could say anything.

>"Hey, Saito, what's your take on all this?"
"I will do whatever the chief and the commander order to to do."
>All eyes turned to Hijikata.
"Uhâ€| Well, we should round up some more men if we're gonna go to war with the Imperial Army. If we do good at Koufu, I'm sure the shogunate'll send us some reinforcements. As far as Awanokami goesâ€| Doesn't matter how much he hates war, I'm sure he knows that sometimes you can't avoid it. I mean, if the shogunate loses, then him and all the rest of the vassals are out of a job. I don't think they want us to lose."
>"Yeah," sighed Nagakura, "I guess you got a point."
He glanced at Kondou apologetically.
>"Shall we head for the mountain near Koufu first," said Sanan, "and prepare for night raids?"
Hijikata thought for a moment.
>He looked away.
"Fury Corps isn't going this time. You're staying here."
>Sanan's eyes went wide, though, whether it was from shock-hurt-or anger-remained to be seen.
"â€|Why?"

>Hijikata glanced back at him.
"If the shogun does send us reinforcements, I can't afford to let them see you. Besides, there are gonna be a lot more men at Koufu. You'll get spotted, and then what's the point of having a secret division?"
>Sanan looked hurt by this.
"Butâ€|"
>Heisuke placed a hand on his shoulder.
"Hey, the war's just started. We shouldn't be in such a rush, Sanan."
>I saw Hijikata and Heisuke exchange a quick look. They must have realized how Sana would react, and talked it over beforehand.
"All right then. Everyone, return to your rooms. We have some time before we leave, so make sure you get your arrairs in order."

â€|
>That was that, and the captains departed to go brief their subordinates. Only Hijikata remained behind, to begin sifting through the massive stacks of paper and maps.
"Umâ€| Hijikata, are you sure it'll be okay?"
>"Hm? What will be okay?"
"This war is going to be difficult, isn't it? Wouldn't it have been better to take the fury corps along?"

>"Oh. That."
He sighed, and set down the map he'd been studying.

>"Remember when Sen warned us about the furies killing people?"
"Yesâ€|"
>"Well, I think it might have been Sanan."
"What?!"Corps is our trump card, but I can't have them murdering people in the streets to satisfy their bloodlust. During Toba-Fushimi, they used silver bullets on the Fury Corps, which made them essentially useless. Until we can figure out how to counteract the silver problem, I need to have Sanan stay here. Heisuke willâ€|keep an eye on him. We also might need them to go collect arms for a counterattack."
>"A counterattackâ€|?"
Then he was even planning for a possible loss at Koufu?
>"This next fight is going to be a big one. We probably shouldn't take you, butâ€| If I leave you here, Kazama might decide to try and snatch you again. Leaving you in the company of the furies is a bad idea too. So I'm taking you with us, but you watch yourself and you stay out of trouble. I tell you to jump, you say 'How high'. Got it?"
"Okayâ€|"
>I could feel a nervous know forming in my stomach, but Hijikata had a far greater case of nerves than I did.<p>

â€|
>It was morning on the day we left for Koufu.
"Everyone's up alreadyâ€|"
>I looked around.
"Huh?"
>The common room was full of men dressed in clothing I'd never seen before.
Nagakura was the first one to notice me gawking at everyone.
>"Oh, hey Chizuru. You're up pretty early."
I blinked at him.

>"Huh? Yourâ€|your clothesâ€| Are you really Nagakura?! What are you wearing?!"
Saito, at this moment, cut in.
>"The commander ordered us to dress in western clothing when going into battle from now on."
When I spotted Hijikata, I had to force my jaw to stay in place.
>He didn't seem to notice me staring at him though.
"Our enemies will be wearing western clothing. Seems like we'd better too, if we want to win."
>"Reallyâ€|?"
This made no sense to meâ€| Why would wearing

different clothing help win a war?

>My eyes wandered over Hijikata's clothing.
He was dressed predominately in black, and whatever his outfit was called gave him an elegant lookâ€|

>It suited him well. He looked as handsome as an actor, and I couldn't help but admire him for a moment longer.
This time he noticed.

>"Something wrong? â€|Am I wearing it wrong?"
"Hm? Oh. No. No, definitely not."

>He gave me an odd sort of smile I barely noticed.
"You're strange."

>I glanced at Kondou.
"Waitâ€| Kondou's not wearing western clothesâ€|"

>Kondou glanced back at me and frowned.
"They're just so tightâ€| And I can't stand walking in theseâ€|uhâ€|I think they're calledâ€| 'shoes'? Besides, I just wouldn't feel like a real warrior in those things. I guess I'm being a little childish about it, but that's my right."

>Hijikata gave him a kind smile.
"â€|You're fine. It's not like you'll be out on the front lines. You just have to act dignified for the troops. Your presence alone is enough to inspire the men."

>Kondou quickly looked away.
"Really? You're going to make me blushâ€|"

>He then glanced at the rest of the men, a stern, authoritative look in his eyes.
"Well, let's be off, then! To Koufu Castle!"

â€|

>And thus the Shinsengumi took on the name "Kouyou Regulatory Company," and headed for Koufu by way of Hachioji.
On the way, Kondou split from the main group to visit his hometown.

>Nagakura seemed quite annoyed by this.
"â€|Kondou still hasn't caught up yet? How long is he gonna sit around that inn getting drunk?"

>Harada gave him his please-calm-down smile.
"Well, he probably hasn't been home in a while. Probably wants to show off how successful he's been. Not to mention I'm sure he wants to visit his wife and his daughter. He hasn't seen them in a long time."

>Nagakura narrowed his eyes at his friend.
"Show off, huhâ€| We're marching to war. You really think this is the time for that shit?"

>Hijikata looked back over his shoulder at Nagakura and Harada.
"He's meeting with some possible recruits."

>He focused his cold stare, now, on Nagakura.
"What better way to get to know new soldiers than by sharing a drink with 'em, hm?"

>Nagakura appeared to be struggling.
"Well, yeah, you got a point, butâ€|"

>Hijikata's eyes narrowed.
"If we'd gotten enough recruits before we left, Kondou wouldn't be out there right now."

Hijikata's words cut like a knife.

>The Shinsengumi had made a name for themselves in Kyoto, true, but the shogunate was faced with a numerically superior force.
We no longer had the luxury of conducting interviews with potential candidates, and only taking the best: No, we had to offer money and alcohol to attract recruits.

>Hijikata would have rather cut off his own arm than stoop that low, but he had no choice.
From seemingly nowhere, Saito approached us.

>"Commander, there's something I need to tell you."
He had been sent on ahead to scout some time before, and had finally returned.

>Hijikata flicked his eyes to him.
"What is it?"

>Saito took a short breath, and seemed for a moment to be gathering himself for something unpleasant.
"It seems that the enemy has already conquered Koufu Castle."

>"What?!" Hijikata gestured quickly to some of the soldiers behind him.
"We've got an urgent update on the situation. Go get the chief, now!"

â€|

>It was some time before Kondou received the message and returned to the main body of soldiers.
That was long enough for news of the castle's fall to spread through the men, and many of them panicked.

>Nearly three hundred of the men we'd left Edo with deserted, reducing our forces to a mere one hundred soldiers.
Nagakura and Harada advised retreat, but Kondou decided that we would form up for battle, and fight until the bitter end.

>Now that we had accepted weapons and money from the shogunate, he said, there could be no retreat.
I'll call in our reinforcements from Edo. We can't afford to lose this one. Tell the men that reinforcements will be arriving soon. We can't afford to have any more deserters."

>Saito nodded.
"As you wish."

>He then turned and jogged off toward the rest of the soldiers.
At last, Hijikata turned to look at me.

>"Go back to Edo. This place is going to turn into a battlefield really soon, and you should be somewhere you'll be safe."
I shook my head.

>"I'll stay hereâ€| I can't run away to somewhere safe while everyone else is off fighting. I'll stay here to protect Kondou until you get back."
Hijikata frowned.

>"How? You can't swing a sword to save your life, and I don't think you've got the stones to kill a man. You're not a soldier."
That was about what I'd expected him to say, but I wasn't going to back down so easily.

>"I-It's true that I'm not much good with a sword, butâ€| I can still be his shield. Any small wounds will heal quickly enough."
His narrowed eyes softened a fraction.

>"Why are you doing this? No one asked you to."
"I know I'm probably out of lineâ€| But I also know that we can't lose Kondou. Not now. I'm sick and tired of always being protected. I want to help! Pleaseâ€|"

>I'd been with them long enough to know just how much Kondou meant to Hijikata-to all of the Shinsengumi.
If I went back to Edo, and Kondou diedâ€|

>No. I refused to be the only person to escape unscathed.
Hijikata made an odd grunt noise.

>He chewed his lip thoughtfully for a moment, his hard eyes never leaving my face.
At last, he sighed and spoke.

>If you're really that serious about this, then I've got an order for you. As a member of the Shinsengumi."
"What?!" My eyebrows shot up.

>I'd been with the Shinsengumi for a long time, but never before had he actually referred to me as one of them, let alone given me any sort of orders.
I'm assigning you to Kondou, as his personal guard. You will remain at his side, and provide him with whatever assistance

he might need."

"And?"

>Oops!
"Y-Yes! Sir!"

>I straightened up and nodded vigorously.
"I, Chizuru Yukimura, will protect my chief, even if it means my li-"

>Hijikata cut me off with a sharp look.
"There's one condition. You can't die."

>"What?"
That wasn't the sort of thing I expected to hear from a man like Hijikata.

>"And don't do anything stupid, like being his shield, or whatever that bullshit was you were saying. I am not ordering you to die."
He gave me one last pointed look, and then turned to look toward Koufu Castle.

>"If your enemy this time turns out to be a bunch of amateurs who're just hpoing to kiss some ass with the Imperial Army, then we might have a chance. If it turns out that they're more like the Satsuma or the Shoshu, though, then we're screwed."
He turned back to me.

>"I'll try and get back as fast as I can, but if something happens before I do, I'm counting on you and Saito to make sure Kondou gets away clean."
His eyes narrowed further and for a moment I thought I saw concern shimmering on their surface.

>"And none of this shield crap. You escape with him. Die, and I'll make sure you regret it, understood?"<p>

I felt a cold sweat break out on my back as Hijikata's words sunk in.

>I'd seen others fight for their lives in battle many times, but this would be the first time I'd actually joined the battle myself.
Would I really be able to protect Kondou?

>Would it even be possible to evade our enemies and escape?
Perhaps Hijikata noticed my sudden fear, because he gave a short, bitter laugh.

>"Hey, take out your sword."
"Huh?"

>I fumbled with it for a moment, surprised at the strangeness of his request, and finally pulled my sword from its scabbard.
Hijikata pulled out his sword as well, in a sure, smooth motion.

>Then he took his Izuminokami Kanesada, and tapped its blade against my own.
The clear tone they made drew goosebumps from my arms.

>"That's called kincho. It's what samurai do, when they swear an oath."
"Oh, really? Interesting!"

>Hijikata smiled and continued.
"Well, I guess technically neither one of us is actually a samurai, so we're just going through the motions, I suppose."

>"Why?"
He grinned now.

>"Proof. I'll come back. And you'll survive too. That's the oath we just made. So you trust me, and you wait. And don't die."
His words were confident, and listening to him I felt as if they'd somehow made me stronger; more capable.

>As someone who dreamt of being a true samurai, then that oath meant a great deal to him.
I had to follow through.

>There could be no breaking this promise.
I looked up at him and smiled back.

>"I understand. I will protect Kondou, and I will survive."
He had given me a chance to show that I was useful, and trusted me with an important task.

>I would complete that task, no matter what.<p>

â€|

>Slowly, the Kouyou Regulatory Company found itself driven into a corner.
Kondou did his best to try and explain to them that he and his men were only there to protect the area around Koufu Castle, in hopes that this situation might be resolved without bloodshed.

>â€|Unfortunately, one of the new recruits cried out that they were the Shinsengumi, and opened fire on the castle's defenders.
That was the spark that lit the powder keg.

>The bulk of our opponent's forces turned out to be men from the Tosa Domain who had been trained in western tactics and weapons.
Our guns were old and didn't have the range to match the Tosa's. It quickly became a hopeless battle.

>Kondou had no choice to retreat.
"We have to go, Kondou! If we don't go now, you'll be killed!"

>He looked at me and then glanced at his men already fighting on the field.
"B-But my men are still fighting out there! We can't run away and leave them!"

>I grabbed his hand.
"If you stay, then you'll just die too! Even if we lose this battle, Hijikata says that as long as you're safe, there's still hope. We can regroup, and fight back later!"

>I tightened my grip and pulled him as hard as I could toward the road down the mountain.<p>

He seemed to be struggling with the urge to break down.

>Kondou looked across the battlefield at his own me: Hopelessly outnumbered; many already fallen.
I saw tears well up at the corners of his eyes.

>He bowed deeply toward the men still engaged in battle just as Saito returned from the front line.
"Are you prepared for the retreat? Good. Let's go."

>I turned to Saito, barely startled by his sudden appearance.
"Right!"

>I glanced back at our Chief.
"Come on Kondou! We have to go!"

>"R-Rightâ€|"<p>

â€|

>Saito and I took hold of him and ran into the forest to escape under cover of night.
"We'll be in Hachioji soon, Kondou. Hang in there."

>"Rightâ€|"
Perhaps it was because I'd never seen him lose a battle before, but this was the first time I'd seen Kondou soâ€|drained.

>"I let so many men dieâ€|"
I placed a gentle hand on his arm.

>"â€|There's no point in beating yourself up over that now. Like Hijikata said, we just don't have what it takes to beat an army with western weapons and tactics."
I might as well have kept my mouth shut, for all that my words seemed to reach him.

>"Perhaps if someone else were the chiefâ€| Maybe they wouldn't have diedâ€|"
"Are you listening to me? I said-!"

>"Heyâ€| Who's out there?"
From the other side of the bushes, I heard a voice that didn't sound familiar.

>I peeked out just long enough to catch sight of a uniform that wasn't ours.
"I know you heard me. Who are you?"

>His voice had quickly taken on a dangerous edge.
"I'll buy you some time. Take the chief and escape."

>"Thank you, Saitoâ€|"
I gave him a quick bow of thanks, and then tip-toed away, Kondou in tow.

>We had to get down off the mountain as quickly as possible.
Just as I had finally managed to get Kondou moving at a decent pace, a shadow leapt out of the undergrowth to bar our way.
>Amagiri.
"I had a feeling you might be hereâ€|"
>"Ah!"
If he was here then Kazama was undoubtedly nearby.

>Kondou placed a calm hand on my arm.
"Yukimuraâ€| Wasn't he with the Satsumaâ€|?"
>"Y-Yesâ€|"
His eyes narrowed.
>"Then we can no longer escape. â€|As a man, I wish to take responsibility for this war, and all the men I've lost. Will you ask him to assist me with my suicide?"
I blanched.
>"Wh-What?! No! I can't let you die here! If you want to take responsibility for your loss, then you have to live, so that you can take your revenge in the next battle!"
Amagiri had remained silent for our short exchange, but now he spoke up.
>"Yes, I serve the Satsuma Domain, but I have been given no orders regarding the Shinsengumi. My only business here is with the girl."
"It shouldn't have come as a surprise but, "Me?"
>He nodded.
"Kazama isâ€|vexed by you, and the young man Hijikata. He disregards the wishes of the domain, and does as he pleases, not as he is ordered. The Satsuma Domain isâ€|troubled. However, we do not yet care to cut our ties with the Satsuma Domain."
>Amagiri's eyes promised violence, and his body tightened, ready to make good on that promise.
He fell in to a fighting stance.

>"For that reason, Chizuru Yukimura, you must die here."
"Ah!"

>He had no weapon, but I knew just how powerful he was, even without one.
Had I been carrying the finest sword ever made, he still could have ended my life easily.
>Nonetheless, I would not be killed without a fight, no matter how futile that fight might prove to be.
I drew my sword and glanced back at Kondou.
>"Kondou, go! This man is after me, and only me. You must escape!"
"B-But-!"
>I tried my best at a kind smile.
"I'll be fine. I have a sword, and he has no weapons at all. Please, the Shinsengumi needs you! You can't abandon them!"
>Kondou's mouth hung slack for a moment, struck speechless.
Then he shut it, set his jaw, and drew his sword.
>"No."
He glanced at me then back to Amagiri.
>"No matter the reason, an honorable warrior cannot run away and leave a woman to fight alone."
"Kondou, what are you saying?! I'm under orders from Hijikata! I have to protect you! Please!"
>But he would not be swayed.
Kondou turned to face Amagiri.

>"â€|I am the chief of a defeated army. My recklessness has sent many of my men to their deaths. But I can still give life to protect a woman. As a warrior-no, as a man-I can think of no better way to die."
"No!"
>His face was calm and serene, and there was no hesitation in his eyes.
I'd seen that look before, on Inoue's face just before he died under Kazama's blade.
>There would be no convincing him. His mind was made up.
When he spoke, his voice rang with determination.
>"I am Isami Kondou, Chief of the Shinsengumi! Yaaaaaaah!"
His sword held high, he charged toward Amagiri.
>"Noooooooooooo!"
He was going to die, just like Inoue had! I buried my face in my hands, overcome with despair and helplessness.

>"You challenge me knowing that you cannot win, for the sake of someone who cannot defend themselves. Your actions are worth of respect."
Amagiri's hands rested calmly at his sides even as Kondou charged toward himâ€|
>"Hmph!"
At the last moment, he slid aside as if he were made of water.

>He grasped Kondou's blade with his left hand, and drove his right into the other man's stomach.
"Gah-!"

>As Kondou began to fall toward the ground, Amagiri flipped him around so that he landed on his back, hard.
"I've knocked most of the air out of him. He won't be able to move for a while."

>He glanced down at Kondou, groaning on the ground, then turned his eyes to me.
"You are next, Chizuru Yukimura. Do not blame me for what I must do."

>I took a deep breath and fixed my eyes on Amagiri's.
He had defeated Kondou with his bare handsâ€|

>Even with my sword, it was foolish to think I could beat him, I knew that.
But that didn't give me the right to turn tail and run just to save myself.

>"â€|Your sword cries. I can see that you are terrified of death."
I choked back a rising whimper. I would NOT give him the satisfaction of seeing me scared.

>But even so, he had seen right through me. I felt my throat tighten.
"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

>It came out as more of a scream of terror than a battle cry, but I charged toward him nonetheless.
With about as much effort as it took for him to breath, Amagiri sidestepped my attack.

>"Ah!"
He'd dodged, but he hadn't counterattacked. I couldn't give up just because my first strike hadn't hit.

>I lashed out again and again, but he bent and twisted away as if his body were made of water. None of my blows came even close to landing.
Then finally-

>"Gah!"
I hadn't even seen his leg move until it slammed into my sword arm with the force of a cannonball.

>My vision went white with pain, and my sword tumbled from my suddenly slack grip.
With a choked moan of agony, I slid to the ground.

>â€|No! I had to get up!
My brain screamed at me to move, to pick up my sword and fight, but the roar of pain drowned it out.

>"This battle is concluded. Do not fear. It will be quick. Then you will hurt no longer."
"Unnh!"

>I ground my teeth in anger and pain even as I felt hot tears spring to my eyes.
I'm sorry Hijikata, I thought to myself. You told me to protect Kondouâ€| You told me to surviveâ€|

>But in the end, I couldn't do anything right.
I squeezed my eyes shut as the tears slid down my cheeks, and waited for the blow to fall.

>"Giving up so easy? A real shinsengumi warrior doesn't stop fighting until they're dead. The only thing on your mind right now should be how you're going to out-think this chump."
That voiceâ€| It couldn't be!

>My head shot up, just in time to see Hijikata leap through the air and land a sword-blow on Amagiri's arm.
"You!"

>Hijikata glared at him.
"Only thought I'd be fighting the Imperial Army out hereâ€| Guess I'll be taking care of a demon, too."

>He stood before us, his hair pure white.
His red eyes shone with desire for battle, and they were fixed on Amagiri.

>"...Did your battle with Kazama teach you nothing?"
Amagiri's eyes widened in frustration.
>"A fury is a mere echo of a true demon. No matter how powerful you may think yourself, you cannot defeat us."
"Never know till you try. You know, they say if you're trying to fight a swordsman barehanded, you have to be three times as good as he is."
>Now Amagiri's eyes narrowed.
"I see! Only bloodshed will satisfy you. Very well. I shall be your opponent."
>He gave Hijikata a short, polite bow, and dropped himself easily into a ready stance.
Hijikata's Izuminokami Kanesada flickered through the air, little more than a streak of silver.

>"Hngh!"
Amagiri blocked with one hand, and dodged away from the flickering blade.
>Hijikata seemed shocked by this.
"What?!"
>Before Hijikata could react, Amagiri's foot drove itself into his stomach.
"Hurk!"
>Hijikata's face twisted in pain and he staggered back a step.
Perhaps it was his fury-born strength, or perhaps it was simply adrenaline, but he surged back and leapt toward Amagiri.

>"Argh!"
His sword leapt forward to bury itself in Amagiri's chest. Blood spurted out, splashing across Hijikata's face.

>"Eh?!"
He jerked back, pulling his sword free. No sooner was it out than the wound began to close.
>"Right! You guys heal quick, don't you? So it's straight through the heart or not at all, huh. Guess it would be too easy otherwise."
His sword shone with fresh blood.
>"I've got you figured, though. I know how you move. You're tough, but you're not impossible."
Drenched in blood, Hijikata looked more like a monster than a human being. His eyes were wide and hungry, and there was something terrifying and inhuman about his expression as he whipped his sword through the air.

>"Guh!"
Amagiri leapt back, Hijikata's sword almost catching his fingers as he did so.
>Jabs and parries; feints and counter feints! The battle flowed back and forth between them like a living thing, its changes moving too fast for any mortal eyes to track.
Neither man showed any sign of tiring, even as they dodged and attacked in ways that would have been unthinkable to any human.
>Even in the middle of that maelstrom of death and violence, I could see Hijikata smiling.
The smell of blood hung heavy in the air, and his grin spoke of a fury's lust for death.
>They leapt apart and regarded one another for several long moments before Amagiri spoke.
"I never imagined that a fury could match me in battle. You are...unexpected. This power of yours! What will you do with it?"
>Hijikata blinked and then narrowed his eyes.
"What?"
>His tone was a mixture of surprise and disdain.
"Protect those I care for. What other reason could there be for wanting power?"

>Amagiri relaxed into a less threatening stance.
"Those you care for! Would you count the Tokugawa Shogunate among that number?"

>Hijikata frowned a moment before his expression became unreadable.
"No! This is bigger than the shogunate. They don't even compare."
>Amagiri said nothing and closed his eyes. What had gotten into

him?
Why had he stopped fighting?

>Then this was the perfect time to strike! I reached down slowly and picked up the sword I'd dropped only minutes before.
I made to move forward, when a hand on my shoulder stopped me.

>"Stay back."
I looked over my shoulder.

>Saito!
I glanced back ahead.

>"B-But Hijikata is going to-"
"That demon no longer thirsts for blood. This battle is over."

>"What?"
I hardly could believe that.

>I turned back to Hijikata and the demon.
"Demons are not meant to involve themselves in the world of humans. Now that you have become a fury, you belong in the shadows as well."

>Hijikata sheathed his sword.
"Yeah. I know that. I'm not interested in my name in the history books."

>Amagiri nodded, as if in approval.
"Well, if you understand that, I shall leave the rest to you."

>"What?"
Hijikata stared at him in confusion.

>"He is proud, even for a demon. If you have indeed humiliated him, I doubt he will ever forgive you. It is unlikely that you will defeat him. However, if there is something you wish to protect. Then please use the power you have been granted to do so."
Hijikata nodded but said nothing.

>Though, in his own stoic way, he looked as confused as I felt.
Could Amagiri be trusted? What were his true intentions?

>"There is. One more thing I must tell you. The power of the furies is not magic or a gift from the gods. Great strength, lightning speed, and mortal wounds that close themselves. This power was already within you, but had you stayed human you would have spent it in decades, not minutes. You are only borrowing these things."
I bit back a gasp.

>My hands flew to my mouth.
By "borrowing," did he mean that when Hijikata used the speed and strength of a fury, he was picking away at his future-his life?

>Hijikata closed his eyes.
"So you're saying that every time I use that stuff, my life gets a little shorter?"

>"Yes."
Amagiri nodded gravely, and Hijikata gave him a bitter smile.

>"Heh. Well, makes sense. Seemed too good to be true. Guess It's only natural I'd have to trade something for this kind of power."
And with no greater protest than that bitter smile, Hijikata accepted the greater cost of becoming a fury.

>The demon turned away, "Then I will be on my way."
"Hold on. I want to ask you something."

>"And that is?" "You sure you want to let us get away? If you don't kill me now, I'm pretty sure I'll end up killing your pal Kazama."
Amagiri shrugged, his face impassive.

>"If you defeat him, then that was all he amounted to. We demons are not sentimental."
Then, with a last polite nod, he disappeared into the night.

>His enemy gone at last, Hijikata slumped, and took a long, deep breath.
"Hi-Hijikata are you all right?"

>"Yeah. Fine. Where's Kondou?"
"Over here," called Saito.

>Hijikata nodded, and ran over to the chief.
"Kondou, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

The chief looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

>Hijikata stood before him, his white hair and red eyes bright in the moonlight. A fury.
Kondou frowned with pained eyes.

>"Toshi...youâ€|"
"Ohâ€|"
Hijikata started back and then looked away, almost guiltily.
Kondou stared at him for a moment before asking in a soft, stunned voiceâ€|"
"Are youâ€|"a fury?"
"Uh...yeah. I didn't have a choice, all right? It was for the Shinsengumi."
For a moment he sounded very composed, but as I peered closer I realized that he was desperately avoiding Kondou's gaze.
He couldn't bear to look his friend in the eye.
We were silent for several moment, and when the first raindrop hit me, it took me by surprise.
"Ohâ€|" It's starting to rain. Look, we've got to get back to Edo and start reorganizing. We need to discuss our next move."
I noticed he was halfway speaking to me.
"Right. Come on Kondou, we have to hurry."
I turned, to make sure Kondou was following, but he simply stood there, as if he'd forgotten how to walk.
"Kondou?" I called gently. "Is something wrongâ€|"
I regreted asking something so stupid.
It began to rain harder, and still Kondou didn't move.
Rain ran down his cheeks to his chinâ€|"or were they tears?"
Finally he spoke.
"Whatâ€|"? What have I been doingâ€|"? Today I sent young men, men who trusted me, into battle. They died."
He turned to Hijikata.

>"And I've made you, a man I've known for years, into a fury. A monsterâ€|"
Hijikata narrowed his eyes at his friend.

>"Kondouâ€|" What is this? No one blames you. It doesn't matter how great of a tactician you are, swords can't beat guns."
A pained look came over his features.
"I made bad calls too, at Toba-Fushimi, and it got Gen and Yamazaki killed. Defeat is in the past. We can't change it now. What we can do is turn this around and win the next time. Right?"
His expression softened into a kind smile.
"Besides, I don't regret becoming a fury. Hell, I'm stronger and faster then I ever was, and I can use that to help you out. Nothing could make me happier than that."
Rain poured down their faces.

>Surely it was my imagination, but for a moment, it almost looked as though Hijikata was crying.
Kondou stared at him for a long moment, then finally drew himself up.
"I apologize. I was being foolish. Forget what I said."
Something in his voice told me that even he didn't quite believe that.

16. Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6

March 1868

We returned to Edo, and met up with Nagakura and the rest of our forces at the hatamoto mansion.
>Kondou was disconsolate from his first lost battle, moreso than most of the captains had expected.
Even after he returned to headquarters, he spent most of his time moping.
>Yoshinobu, the supreme commander of the shogunate army, was ordered out of the imperial court and into house arrest at the Kan'ei Temple

in Ueno.
The imperial court was now in the hands of the Satsuma and the Choshu, and it was becoming painfully clear that the loyalist faction was in a numerically untenable position.

â€|

>Some time later, I was sweeping the entrance when I looked up to see Saito on his way out.
"Oh, Saito. Are you off to work? Have a good day."

>He glanced at me, his eyes brimming with concern.
"When you have a moment, could you make some of your delicious tea and take it to the commander?"

>Without even waiting for me to respond, he gave a curt nod and was off.
Saito had never beenâ€|talkative, but lately he'd seemed exceptionally taciturn.

>Perhaps he was still upset over what had happenedâ€|<p>

Earlierâ€|

"Umâ€| Are you guys really leaving?"

>Nagakura and Harada stopped and glanced back at me, a somewhat pained look in their eyes.
Nagakura folded his arms and gave a heavy sigh.

>"Yeahâ€| It wasn't easy, but we've made up our minds."
He glanced at the compound.

>"Our path isn't Kondou's. I don't think we can follow him anymore."
I tried really hard not to sound as hurt as I felt.

>"Ohâ€| It's going to be lonely here without you."
I paused a moment to recompose my expression.

>"What are you going to do now?"
It was Harada who replied.

>"We haven't quite figured that out yetâ€| We'll still be taking it to the Imperial Army, that's not gonna changeâ€|"
Nagakura suddenly grinned.

>"I'm sure you'll be hearing stories in a couple months about how we killed a hundred rebels apiece. â€|Heck, probably in a couple weeks!"
Harada also smiled.

>"Well, take care."
I gave them both what I hoped wasn't too pathetic of a smile.

>"Okayâ€| You tooâ€|"<p>

Presentâ€|

We'd been so closeâ€|

>It was sad to see them go.
Then again, I'd only known them a few years. How sad their departure had to be for Kondou, Hijikata, and Saito, who'd known them much, much longerâ€|

>Okita's condition worsened, and he'd been moved to a separate house in Sendagaya.
On by one, our friends from Shiei Hall were disappearing.

>Why had it come to this, I wonderedâ€|
Cleaning suddenly felt particularly pointless. I decided to go make some tea and see if Hijikata was in his room.

>"Hijikata, I've brought you some teaâ€|"
I opened the door as I spokeâ€|

>â€|And stopped, halfway in, when I saw Sanan and Heisuke.
All three faces were set in hard lines. Whatever I had interrupted, it was serious.

>"I-I'm so sorry! I didn't realize you were in the middle of a meeting!"
I began to back away as quickly as I could, when-

>"You can stay."
Hijikata's words froze me in place, but before I could reply, Sanan spoke.
>"You can't possibly be serious about this! Why would you cancel augmentation of the Fury Corps?!"
Hijikata flicked his eyes back to Sanan, narrowed and cold.
>"I am serious. There won't be any more furies. Make do with what you have."
Sanan was clearly trying to reign in his anger.
>"I'm sorry, but I can't support your decision. The Shinsengumi's manpower is at an all-time low. It seems to me that expanding the Fury Corps should be a top priority. Heisuke told me that Nagakura and Harada have left. That's a serious blow to us, Hijikata. Even if we can recruit more warriors, they'll just be more rabble. As soon as they're sent into battle, they'll flee. Wasting our energy on men like that is foolish. Don't you think that it would be better to concentrate our efforts on expanding and improving our furies?"<p>

Heisuke seemed very much like he wished to leave the room. He looked down at the floor.

>He'd said nothing since I'd arrived, but it was clear from his face that, fury or not, he didn't always agree with Sanan.
Hijikata glanced at him and as he turned back to Sanan, his expression softened.

>"You have a point. If all we want to do is increase our strength, then the fastest way to do that is to focus on the Fury Corps."
Sanan frowned.

>"Then why do you-!"
The commander's eyes narrowed again.

>"There's a problem with the furies. A big one. We only just found out about it. Our source is...reliable."
I gave a quiet gasp.

>He meant to tell Sanan what he'd learned from Amagiri.
"The power of a fury comes from your€I guess you could say potential. Basically, the more you use it, the shorter your life gets."

>Sanan's eyes quickly widened.
"What?!"

>"Yeah. We shouldn't be using the furies unless we really have to."
Sanan took a shuddering breath, the color draining from his face.

>Silence filled the room for several long seconds, before Sanan finally raised his head and spoke.
"Then that is yet another reason why our research should continue. It is a flaw, yes, and a serious one. But with more research, we may find a way to circumvent it, or even to counteract it entirely. €As a fury yourself, surely you understand the necessity€"

>Hijikata's expression didn't change.
This is not a request, Sanan. This is an order. As your commander, I am telling you that research on the furies will stop. There will be no more furies."

>Sanan appeared to be on the edge of rage.
But he said nothing. Instead he simply glared at Hijikata, as seconds stretched into minutes.

>Finally, Heisuke spoke.
"Let's go, Sanan."

>Sanan sat unmoving for a few more moments until at last he sagged, defeated, and turned to Heisuke.
"Very well€"

>Sanan and Heisuke had turned to leave the room when-
"Oh, Kondou," said Heisuke, somewhat startled. "What're you doing here? Going somewhere?"

>I couldn't see him but something in his voice sounded a bit

odd.
"Oh, uhâ€¦ No, I'm justâ€¦out for a walk. Just passing by. Don't mind me."

>I heard them exchange a few more short pleasantries in the hallway, and then three sets of footsteps faded away.
The room grew awkwardly silent.

>Hijikata sighed and let his gaze drift out the window.
"Th-The tea's cold nowâ€¦ I'll go pour you a new one."

>I stood to leave, desperate to be away from that room and its stifling atmosphere.
But Hijikata had other thoughts in mind.

>"No, this is fine. I'm thirsty. Cold tea's perfect."
He took a sip and sighed again, quietly, a distant look in his eyes.

>The workload he'd taken on was tremendous, and he was tired all day, every day, but he looked drained-moreso than those things could account for.
How hard had Nagakura and Harada's departure hit him?

>He gave me a sad smile.
"He's right about Shinpachi and Harada leaving. That hurt us, bad."

>His voice shook almost imperceptibly, and his mouth curled into a now bitter smile as he spoke.
"Well, I had a feeling this might happen some day. It's our fault for falling short of what they wanted. If what we're fighting for and what they're looking for aren't the same thing, then why wouldn't they leave? Don't need to let feeling of loyalty tie you down. It's over now, and that's fine. They'll be all right on their own. So will we."

I got the feeling that Hijikata's words were more for himself than for me.

>"But Damnâ€¦ We sure have lost a lot of people. Things areâ€¦different."
His eyes were focused on something far away, and his voice had dropped to little more than a mumble.

>I couldn't even imagine what was going through his headâ€¦ To be a leader, and command the loyalty and obedience of tens or hundreds of men was something I couldn't begin to understand.
Every night, he worked until the sun came up.

>It was painful for the furries to be up and about during the daylight hours, but that didn't stop Hijikata: Every day, he met with representatives of the shogunate.
Even I could see the horrible toll it was taking on his body. What could I do for himâ€¦?

>"Please, Hijikataâ€¦you have to stop."
His eyes snapped back into focus, and swiveled to stare into mine.

>"What?"
His voice was much harder than I'd expected, and it gave me pause.

>No, I thought to myself, this was something I had to say.
"I'm only telling you to do what you told Sanan to do a few minutes ago. Don't use your fury abilities unless it's an emergency."

>His eyes narrowed.
"Why should I listen to you?"

>"Umâ€¦wellâ€¦"
His glare was unnerving.

>"Well, you became a furryâ€¦because you were protecting me from Kazama. If you hadn't had to fight a demon, then you'd still be a human now. You wouldn't have had to-"
"This again? Look, I told you, I chose to do this. Nobody forced me. Stop worrying about that stuff."

>He sounded quite calm and nonchalant, as if he'd already accepted his approaching death.
Butâ€¦was that really true? Or only an act he'd put on to ease my mind?

>Who could ever be at peace with bargaining away their life, no matter what sort of power such a bargain might grant them?
"When

you say things like that, it just makes it worseâ€¦ If you're in pain, please, just say so. Can't you just tell me the truth? Don't you wish you'd never become a fury?"

>For a moment the room was silent, and then Hijikata began to laugh.
"Manâ€¦ I just can't win with you, can I?"

>"Umâ€¦?"
He gave me a very kind smile.

>"You really are an Edo girl, aren't you?"<p>

I still didn't know how to respond.

>I was rather stunned. Laughter and levity certainly hadn't been the reaction I'd expected.
"I think I've told you this before, haven't I? Anyway, I'm the youngest kid in my family. They're farmers in Tama. My mom and dad both died when I was still young. Than meant my sister, who's about four years older than me, had to raise me. You sound kind of like her. â€¦Souji's sister Mitsu sounds the same way, too. When you go off, it's like I'm getting scolded by my family. Makes me feel like I've got to listen to you."

>I blinked and then smiled.
"â€¦Really?"

>I'd never heard him talk about his childhood like this beforeâ€¦
It feltâ€¦surreal.

>"â€¦If what Amagiri told us is true, then so long as I don't use my fury powers, I'll be fine, right? If it gets bad I'll tell you. Stop worrying about me."
He'd likely still keep most of his pain to himself-that was just who he was-but if he really meant the he would tell me when it became unbearableâ€¦

>"All right. I understand."
I'd take his word for it, this time.

>"So, umâ€¦ What will the Shinsengumi be doing now?"
"Well, we're going to need to get Kondou back on his feet first, but after that we plan on heading north."

>"North?"
He nodded slowly.

>"Right now the Shogunate's about as useful as tits on a bull, but we've still got the northeast. If Aizu and Sendai can hold the center, then we've still got a chance. Doctor Matsumoto is rounding up some men, weapons, and ammunition for us at Nagareyama. We'll meet up there, then head to Aizu. Even if the rebels manage to take Edo, they'll probably have to fall back to Kyoto eventually. Once they do that, we can take Edo pretty-"
Suddenly his body twisted and hunched, and he grasped a hand to his suddenly heaving chest.

>"Gah! Argh-!"
Hijikata's eyes bulged from his head in pain, and he'd begun to sweat; hundreds of tiny beads appearing all over his face.

>"H-Hijikata?! What's wrong?"
He only shook his head, unable to speak through the pain.

>â€¦I'd seen him like this before.
"â€¦Is it the bloodlust?"

>He didn't respond, but I'd known I was right even as I asked.
Hijikata was in pain. I had no other choice.

>With steady hands, I pulled my sword from its scabbard and laid the edge against my fingers, ready to cut-
But Hijikata's hand on my wrist stopped me.

>"Whyâ€¦? The pain will go away if you drink blood."
I tried to pull away, but he held fast and shook his head.

>"â€¦I'll do it. Just...sit stillâ€¦"
He moved around behind me and loosened my collar.

>I felt the cool air touch my neck, followed by Hijikata's fingers. He was looking for a place to make the cut.
A moment later I felt the kiss of a cold blade against my skin, and then, without a sound, I felt it sink in.

>I bit my lip at the pain, but said nothing.
"Ah!"
>His warm lips touched the cut on my neck, and then I felt his face press against me as he began to drink. Again and again he drank, as thirsty as a man who had been stranded in the desert.
I could feel his breath on my skin. It made me shiver.
>Never before had I been so close to a man. Nerves made my body begin to twist, until Hijikata's hands grabbed my shoulders. When he spoke, his voice was low and husky.
"Don't turn around."

>"O-Okayâ€|"
I realized suddenly that he didn't want me to see him in his fury state.
>Those few words-a last, strained defense of his wounded pride-tore at my heart, and I felt a lump rise in my throat.
For his sake, I did my best to calm my breathing, rapid from nerves and excitement. Though I did my best to hide it, there was no denying that my heart was beating faster and faster.
>"I'm sorryâ€| I just can't afford to lose it right now."
Was he saying that to convince me, or to convince himself?
>"Of course. I understand. You don't have to hold back. I want to help, in whatever way I can."
The day that I'd watched Inoue and Yamazaki die, I'd felt a horrible, torturous regret: There had been nothing I could do for them.
>Ever since, I'd cursed myself for being unable to help the Shinsengumi, after they'd sheltered and protected me for so long.
But now, at last, there was something I could do. I could ease Hijikata's thirst.
>Hijikata sighed and I felt his grip on me tighten.
Emotions washed over me-guilt, disappointment, anger, regret-and I realized they were Hijikata's.
>His hands were warm.
Eventually, he let go, slowly, and stepped away.
>His breathing had returned to normal, and there was color in his face again.
With the back of his hand, he wiped the last of the blood from his lips and sighed with relief.
>"Sorry for doing that to youâ€|"
"Oh, no, it's nothing. See? The cut's already closed up."
>I shrugged my collar back up to my neck and smiled.
"I'll be staying here for quite a while. So if you ever need me, please, just let me know."
>He gave me a quizzical look.
"You're telling me I can just drink your bloodâ€|whenever?"
>"Yesâ€|"
I nodded, and he gave me a crooked smile.
>"Shouldn't say things like that, kid. Someone's gonna use you up and throw you away."
He was only joking, and I knew it, but there was a part of me that felt if it was Hijikata who used me up, then maybe it wouldn't really be so bad.

â€|

>Some time after that incident we moved again, to the Kaneko mansion in Nagareyama.
Kondou had become reluctant to go into battle, but after several talks with Hijikata, he was eventually convinced otherwise.

>Until we'd finished our preparations for our journey to Aizu, we would be training in Nagareyama.
I was told Saito was off in some place called Ichikawa, where he would be training in the use of new, modern armament.

>Sanan and Heisuke had left with the Fury Corps along the Utsunomiya route to Aizu, since they couldn't go to the Kaneko mansion.<p>

â€|

>Ever since we'd arrived, Kondou had seemed like an entirely different person-listless, and without any kind of drive.
His days were spent in his room, reading books, or on the porch, staring at flowers.

>It was easy to see that he was depressed about his loss at Koufu. Eventually, he would get over it and go back to his normal, cheerful self.
Or at least, that was what we all hoped.

>"Kondou, I've brought you some tea."
I set down the tea and snacks I'd brought on his reading table.

>"Oh, thank you."
He paused in the act of flipping a page to smile up at me.

>"What are you reading?"
"Hm? Oh. I'm reading the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and the Biography of Kiyomasaâ€¦ Military history, basically. I practically know them by heart by now, but every time I read them I find something new to be fascinated by. When I was young, I wanted to be just like Kansei Teikun-a legendary warrior. I wanted to fight for someone other than myself."

>His grin made his face look like that of a little boy, but after a moment the grin faded.
"â€¦But I guess dreaming about being a great commander doesn't make you oneâ€¦ I wish I'd realized that a little earlier."

>He shut the book softly and set it down on the top of his desk.
"What are you talking about?"

>I couldn't just let him fall back into sadness when he just displayed such joy.
"You've only just begun."

>But he didn't even seem to hear meâ€¦
And thenâ€¦

>"How's Toshi?"
"I think he's up in his room, writing something. Probably order for Saito. He's off in Ichikawa right now, you know."

>Kondou's head sagged toward his chest.
"Ohâ€¦ I keep giving Toshi so much to doâ€¦"

>"â€¦I don't think he's pushing himself too hard. And nothing makes him happier than being able to help you out. That's just the kind of guy he is."
Kondou laughed.

>"You've really turned out to be quite an asset to him, haven't you? I think you know him quite well by now."
I blinked.

>"Y-You think soâ€¦?"
He seemed quite serious about it, and I felt my cheeks getting warm.

>"That's rightâ€¦ Back when I first got here, I was supposed to be hisâ€¦page or something."
He gave another bark of laughter and I suddenly wondered if he was recalling Hijikata's reaction when I had been forced upon him.

>"Ah yesâ€¦ I never thought you'd be here for so long, to be honest."
Before I knew it, we were reminiscing about the time we'd spent in Kyoto.

>Back then, we never could have guessed that the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance would take control of the imperial court. Okita had been healthy, Inoue and Yamazaki had still been alive, and Nagakura and Harada hadn't leftâ€¦
Every day was fun and excitingâ€¦

>"Butâ€¦I know things will work out," I told him, "Hijikata will get us through this."
He responded with a melancholy laugh.

>"Don't you think you're asking quite a bit of him, Yukimura?"
"What do you meanâ€¦?"

>Before he could answer, the door slid open with a snap, and Hijikata and Shimada ran in, their faces tense and drawn.
"Hijikata? What's happened?"

>"We gotta go, now. The mansion's surrounded."
Hijikata was out of breath. They must have been running.

>"What?!"
It was Shimada who answered.

>"There's two, maybe three hundred of them out there. We came in through the back, so they wouldn't spot us."
Hijikata's eyes brimmed with frustration.

>"If there were only twenty or thirty of them, then maybe we could take 'em."
Hijikata worked his lip and glanced out the window, frustrated and tense.

>"Don't even have time to call back Saito and his men. Guess we'll have to come up with something here. Shimada, Chizuru, you two take Kondou and go on ahead."
"What?! Hijikata, not even you can take on that many people! And it's |it's daytime out there |"

>He turned on me.
"I won't know till I try!"

>Shimada also had his doubts about Hijikata's odds.
"Hijikata, the soldiers out there are all riflemen."

>Both Shimada and I moved toward the door, in an effort to physically stop Hijikata, if it came to that.
Kondou had stayed silent and contemplative since Hijikata and Shimada had entered, but now he finally spoke.

>"Wait | Toshi, you don't have to do that. I'll go have them take me to thier headquarters."
Hijikata's expression cycled quickly from shock to disbelief to anger.

>"What the hell?! You might as well just paint a target on your chest!"
Kondou calmly gazed at him.

>"I wouldn't introduce myself as Kondou of the Shinsengumi, of course. I'll just tell them we're hatamoto, and we're here to secure this location. That ought to make them think about it for a bit."
He gave his friend a pitiful smile.

>"At any rate, it should buy enough time for you guys to get away."
Shimada and I were both shocked into silence, but not Hijikata.

>"Listen to yourself," he shouted quickly verging on panic.
"You really think they'll let you just waltz in and fuck with them like that?! You saw how they work back in Kyoto! There's no way in hell those bastards don't hate our guts! They won't believe that crap about us being hatamoto for a second!"

>Kondou continued, still calm.
"Well, even if I do get captured, I have the status of a daimyo. They can't just kill me."

>"You've gotta be kidding me," snapped Hijikata. "You think they'll give a shit about a title you got from the old shogun?! You go out there, you're signing your death warrant. You really think I'll just let you do that?! Look, I'm a fury now! So long as they don't shoot me through the heart, I'll be fine!"
But no matter what he said, Kondou's expression didn't change.

>He only gazed back at him, his expression cool and placid.
"I've made my decision. Nothing you say can convince me otherwise."

>Hijikata began to shake.
In all the time I'd been with the Shinsengumi, I'd never seen Hijikata and Kondou act like this.

>Usually it was Hijikata who kept his cool and Kondou who succumbed to his emotions.
But this time |

>"No! NO! What the hell's the Shinsengumi going to do without it's chief?! You're coming with me even if I have to knock you out and drag you! You have a responsibility to the Shinsengumi! You don't get to die and run away from that!"
Hijikata was screaming at Kondou, his white-knuckled fists gripping the front of the other man's kimono and his eyes red with held-back tears.

>But his fury and pleas broke across Kondou's impassable calm like so much wind against a mountain.
Finally Kondou narraowed his eyes at his friend and |

>"This is a direct order! You will go to Ichikawa to meet with the

rest of our men, and Yukimura and Shimada will go with you!"<p>

Hijikata looked at him as though he'd been slapped. He stumbled back, shocked by the force of Kondou's voice.

>"You're going to tell me what to doâ€|? What the hell is this?!"
His eyes were still dry, but his voice trembled.

>"Aren't your chief's orders absolute? You've ordered plenty of men to kill themselves or become a fury from disobeying that rule, but you are somehow an exception? Is that the sort of warrior you want to be?"<p>

Hijikata turned away and said nothing.

>As long as he'd been commander, Hijikata had strove to lead by example. He had lived by the Code, and demanded that others do likewise, so the the Shinsengumi might have true samurai.
No doubt Kondou had counted on that fact.

>He meant to use it to keep Hijikata alive.
"Shimada, Yukimura, I want you to leave with Toshi. If you take too long, they'll attack, and my surrender will have meant nothing."

>He gave Shimada and me a little shove to get us moving. Shimada turned to look at Hijikata.
For a moment, he said nothing.

>"Commanderâ€| Let's go."<p>

Hijikata didn't move. He only stood, chewing at his lip, until Kondou laid his hands on his friend's shoulders and gave him a warm smile.

>"Hey, Toshiâ€| Let it go. Let me go. You've run yourself ragged trying to earn me the status and fame that I wanted. You even turned yourself into a furyâ€| It kills me to see you do all these things for meâ€| I'm not worth it."
Hijikata didn't look up. He blinked rapidly, trying to hold back tears, and stared desperately at the floor.

>Then he swallowed, and when he spoke his voice was tight and strained.
"Iâ€| If I do this, then what have I been fighting for all these years? I became a warrior, served our countryâ€| I won battles and killed menâ€| All because I thought you'd be there at the end, to celebrate with usâ€|"

>He sounded just like Kondou had, after the battle at Koufu Castle.
Kondou frowned.

>"I'm sorryâ€| I brought you here. I did this to you. When I think about it nowâ€|it was all sort of a dream. We weren't real samurai, but we strapped on our swords and went to work for the imperial court."
His voice was warm, but it seemed that very kindness make it even harder for Hijikata.

>He took a deep breath, and squeezed his eyes shut, willing the tears to go away.
The room was silent for a few long moments before he finally spoke.

>"Shimadaâ€| Send a message to our remaining men. We need to secure an escape route."
"Yes, Sir!"

>"Chizuru, stay here. Once we're ready, I'll come get you."
"All rightâ€|"

>With that, Hijikata and Shimada left, and Kondou and I were alone.
He reached into his kimono and pulled something out.

>"Yukimuraâ€| Take this with you."
He handed me a small cloth bag. It clinked as he laid it in my hand.

>"What is itâ€|?"
Money. To help you escape. I wasn't able to do

anything for you. This is a token of my appreciation, for all you've done for us. Please take it."

How could he be so kind when his situation was so grim?

>His warmth still lingered on the bag as I took it. I felt a lump rise in my throat.
"You still have time. I'll tell Toshi. Once you get away, go somewhere safe and look for Doctor Matsumoto. I don't think they'd do anything too bad to a girl like you. Just forget you ever had anything to do with us. Marry a man you love, and live a peaceful life. Find happiness."

>I shook my head.
"No, I won't run. I want to go with Hijikata."

>"I'mâ€|I'm his pageâ€|"
I bit my lip, afraid that if I said any more I might cry. Instead, I looked up at Kondou and did my best to smile.

>His eyes were warm as he looked down at me.
"I seeâ€| Toshi's been blessed with some great friends, hasn't he? I'll be counting on you, then. Take care of him for me."

I tried to respond, but the lump in my throat made any sort of speech impossible.

â€|

>Eventually Hijikata and Shimada returned, and we left the Kaneko mansion.
I looked back over my shoulder many times as we ran, thinking about how-soon now-Kondou would be surrendering to his enemies.

>Perhaps, I thought to myself time and again, if we turn back now we can still rescue him.
There have to be ways all four of us can escapeâ€|

>Shimada seemed to feel the same way, but Hijikata never once turned to look back.<p>

â€|

>We ran and ran, through the forest to Ichikawa.
It didn't matter how quickly we got there-it wouldn't be soon enough to bring back an army to save Kondou.

>We all knew that, but Hijikata didn't slow down.
Shimada glanced over at me in concern.

>"Are you all right, Yukimura? I can carry you if you're getting tired."
"I'm fine. I can keep going!"

>Hijikata, his back to us, said nothing, but I could feel the pain that tore at him with every step he took away from Kondou.<p>

â€|

>The sun had begun to dip toward the western horizon and night had started to fall, whenâ€|
"Hey! You there! Stop! Where are you headed?"

>It was an imperial soldier.<p>

Hijikata stopped and gave a frustrated sigh. He frowned, and made to walk past the soldier.

>Another soldier stepped forward.
"Hey, he said stop! Goddammit, are you another one of those shogunate guys?"

>The first guy suddenly suddenly narrowed his eyes at Hijikata.
"Waitâ€| I've seen this guy beforeâ€| â€|That's it! He's Hijikata, from the Shinsengumi!"

>The second guy grabbed his gun.
"What?! The Shinsengumi? You mean the guys who offed Sakamoto?!"

>As they began to scramble for their guns, I notices the mark of the

Tosa Domain on their uniforms.
Unfortunately, they weren't fast enough to beat Hijikata.

>His hair snapped white, and he shot toward the soldiers, Kanesada in hand.
"Aaaaaah!"

>"Gah-!"
His strike was so fast and elegant that the eye barely even had time to realize it had happened before two men fell dead to the ground.

>"Wrong day to fuck with me, boys."
A volley of gunfire erupted from the rest of the imperial soldiers nearby.

>"Gah!"
I heard the wet thunk of bullets hitting Hijikata, and he stumbled but almost immediately his wounds began to close.

>"That's how getting shot feels, huhâ€|? Not as bad as I thought. This is nothing! This doesn't even come close to what Kondou's going through right now!"
Hijikata launched himself at the nearest of the riflemen, his sword already in motion and his face twisted by grief and anger.

>There were only a few men-even without the powers of a fury, Hijikata and Shimada could have made short work of them.
But the rage and frustration had been boiling inside him ever since we'd left Kondou, and now they erupted in a torrent of violence.

>"No! Stop!" I screamed. "Don't do this!"
He had to understand what he was doing-

>"Shut up! Stay out of this, goddammit!"
He knew full well what he was doing, but he was past caring.

>Hijikata leapt from tree to tree, his sword flashing like lightning. Every time it moved, a life ended.
Rage, anguish, and an unrestrained thirst for blood radiated out from him like heat from a fire. I could feel it, even from where I stood.

>Blood soaked his face, chest, and hands, and still he cut and cut; never satisfied.
Shimada watched in horror.

>I saw him shiver out of the corner of my eye.
I couldn't blame himâ€| Hijikata looked as if he'd forgotten how to do anything but kill. every move he made drew blood, and every swing of his sword spilled a man out onto the dirt.

>He looked like a monster.
At last the only person still alive was Hijikata himself. Silence fell over the forest again.

>He turned to face us, every inch of skin slick with blood.
"Shimadaâ€| Go see if there are any more of them."

>"Y-Yes, sir!"
He disappeared into the forest, desperate to distance himself from the carnage.

>"â€|You. Go with him."
His voice was cold and rough, like stones grinding against one another.

>Normally I would have immediately done as he asked, and headed off into the forest after Shimada.
But this timeâ€|

>"What the hell? I gave you an order."
His words cut like a knife, but I didn't move.

>"I'm sorryâ€| But I can't do that."
"I am your commanding officer. I am giving you an order!"

>He sounded angry, as he often did, but behind that anger was a deep, miserable sadness.
If he didn't stay angry, I felt, he would probably cry.

>"I promise I won't get in your way, but please just let me stay here with you."
I knew there was nothing I could do for him, but neither could I bear to leave him alone.

>He turned his back to me-to everything. His face was hidden from me, but suddenly his tall back and broad shoulders seemed small, tired, and very, very lonely.
What could I say to him? How could I make him feel better?

>I searched my soul for something, anything, but I came up

empty.
After an interminable, miserable silence, he finally spoke.

>"What the hell did I do...all this for?"
How could this be the card fate had dealt two men so honest and determined? It just wasn't fairâ€|

>"Was it just so I could give Kondou to those bastards? I busted my ass to give my friend to the enemy? I was going to make him important. Help carry him all the way to the top. Kansei Teikun and Kiyomasa wouldn't have anything on him. I wanted to see him fight in real battles, the kind they write about. I wanted to see him become a true warrior. I wanted to see just how far the owner of a dojo from the sticks and a farmer's son could go."
Hijikata's voice had begun to shake.

>I wasn't even sure he still knew I was there. If he did, it seemed he no longer cared.
"I thought we were shooting for the same dream. Long as it was for him, I felt like I could do anything. So what the hell am I doing here, alive, while he'sâ€|he's

god-knows-what?! After all the self-righteous preaching, what did I do?! I turned around and left him to the wolves! Hell, I'm just like the shogun! Soon as things got dangerous, I turned tail and left better men to deal with my mess! Goddammit! Why am I alive?!"

>It tore me apart to hear him talk like that. I couldn't bear to just stand and listen.
I wrapped my arms around him as far as they would go, and pressed my face against his back.

>He said nothing.
So I did instead.

>"Kondou saidâ€| I mean, after you left, I told him that you'd figure it out. And he said that I was asking too much of youâ€|"
No, I told myself, you can't cry. Hijikata is in far more pain than you are.

>But to no avail.
So the tears began to fall, and I struggled ahead.

>"I know how much you care about Kondou, but he did what he did because he feels the same about you. Don't you see? It's not your fault. You can't blame yourselfâ€| Kondou didn't want you to die. That's why you're still alive. He ordered you to leave. You didn't have a choice! Justâ€| Please, don't blame yourselfâ€|"
Hijikata listened, saying nothing.

>â€|Or perhaps he didn't even hear me.
Why did words feel so powerless when I needed them most? What good were they if I couldn't comfort someone I cared for when they needed it most?

>After several long minutes, I felt Hijikata relax.
"He did it to save meâ€| But what the hell am I supposed to do without Isami Kondou of the Shinsengumi? The dream of making him somebody important is what got me here. Now that that's goneâ€| I don't have anything left. I'm nothing."

>He gave a short bark of laughter, but there was no humor in it.
"Seriously, Kondouâ€| Stop giving me all the shitty jobsâ€| I'm a soldier, not a handyman, dammitâ€|"

>He choked back a sob and fell silent.<p>

â€|

>We met up with other shogunate troops some time later in Ichikawa, and decided to head to Nikko as remnants of the old feudal government.
Saito had been in Ichikawa for a while, but he'd left earlier for Aizu, to oversee the Fury Corps.

>I worried about what would happen to Kondou, but perhaps because the situation seemed grim, none of us ever brought it up.<p>

* * *

><p>(OMG! That was so F*ing sad TTnTT Poor Hijikata!)

17. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

April 1868

As soon as he could, Hijikata began to visit as many former vassals as he could finagle audiences with, requesting clemency for Kondou. He was busy day and night, and hardly slept.

In the end, though, the former vassals were wary of upsetting the Imperial Army, and refused or outright ignored Hijikata's pleas.

On April 11th, the head of the Satsuma Domain met with an ambassador from the shogunate. As a result of these negotiations, Edo Castle was surrendered to the Imperial Army.

â€|But the war was not over. We'd left Edo in advance of the negotiations to meet up with Denshu Company.

â€|

â€|

Hijikata returned from his other engagements as we joined with Denshu Company, and together we headed north.

Saito had taken the main body of the Shinsengumi ahead to Aizu, in order to keep an eye on the Fury Corps. We left Ichikawa and set off down the Nikko route to Aizu.

"â€|"

We'd finally managed to meet up with some allied soldiers, but many of them looked at us with a strange mixture of curiosity and fear. It wasâ€|unpleasant.

Shogunate soldiers were usually sons of wealthy hatamoto families, but the men of the Shinsengumi had acquired a reputation as murderers and thugs. Many of the other soldiers looked at us askance.

"Hey, are those the Shinsengumi? The murderers?" Muttered a soldier.

The soldier nearest him nodded. "Yes, and I've heard rumors that they're savages. They kill men for no reason-even their comrades! Best not to make eye contact. You never know what might set that sort off."

It wasn't difficult to hear the gossip about us that had begun to travel the ranks.

Shimada glared at them, grinding his teeth.

"Bunch of gossipy old ladiesâ€|" He turned to Hijikata. "You want me to go shut them up, sir?"

Hijikata also seemed annoyed.

"No. They want to talk, let 'em talk."

He sounded even more irritated than usual.

"Umâ€¦ Hijikata, are you all right? You don't look too well."

He responded quickly but didn't look at me.

"I'm fine."

He certainly didn't look it. His skin was a pale color, almost blue, and he looked as if he might collapse any moment.

Marching during the day was hardly pleasant for a fury, and it was easy to see that Kondou was still foremost in his mindâ€¦

I had to admit, he did have good reason to be on edge.

"Excuse me, could you please let me pass? Ah, my apologies. Oopsâ€¦"

Someone was moving toward us from the back of the column, pushing his way through the rest of the marching soldiers.

"Hello, are you Hijikata? I've heard a great deal about you and the Shinsengumi."

Hijikata turned and gave the stranger a sneer that could have frozen a bonfire.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, pardon my rudeness. I haven't introduced myself. I'm Keisuke Otori, the Infantry Magistrate. I command Denshu Company. I'm sure I'll be talking with the Shinsengumi a great deal in the future. It's nice to meet you."

Keisuke gave a friendly laugh and extended his right hand.

For a man who claimed to command the infantry, he looked more like the son of a wealthy merchant than a soldier.

"â€¦"

Hijikata said nothing and stared down at the hand as if it were a week-old fish.

The strange man looked at his own hand and frowned.

"Ohâ€¦ I forgot to take my gloves off."

He hurriedly plucked the glove off of his right hand and then thrust it toward Hijikata again.

Hijikata seemed annoyed by this.

"What? You want money or something?"

Keisuke smiled but didn't lower his hand.

"Oh, umâ€¦ Well, it's called shaking hands. You've never heard of it? It's how people greet one another in Europe."

Hijikata snorted under his breath and turned away. Otori left his hand out for a few moments longer, before pulling his glove back on silently.

Hijikata opened his eyes again as Shimada approached.

"Do you have som business with Hijikata?"

"Ah, yes, that's right. i was hoping to hear some stories about the Toba-Fushimi from the commander of the Shinsengumi himself."

Hijikata frowned, and when he spoke his voice was like acid.

"Sure you wouldn't rather hear some ridiculous rumor from a drunk soldier? Seems like everybody here loves to gossip."

Otori frowned again.

"Oh, I apologize for the men. We've finished our training, but it appears military discipline hasn't quite caught on yet."

He gave himself a little shake, as if to clear his mind.

"At any rate, I came here to give you an overview of how our forces are being deployed. We've go 3,000 escaped soldiers from the former shogunate in the advance guard, main body, and rear guard. As the highest-ranking officer here, I-"

Hijikata blinked seeming startled by something.

"Waitâ€¦ You? You're telling me you're in charge of all this?"

Otori seemed pleased that this surprised him.

"Yes, Iâ€¦suppose that's true."

Hijikata looked as if he'd just swallowed something rotten.

He'd only just lost his chief, and now Otori was trying to force himself, however oblivious, into Kondou's place.

No one, no matter how skilled, could replace his friend.

Still, Otori seemed to have expected to be rebuffed, and continued, showing no sign of being put off by Hijikata's behavior.

"The advance guard is made up mostly of men from the Kuwana and Aizu domains. The main body is my Denshu Company, and the rear guard is composed primarily of men from the shogunate's New World Army. I'm thinking of putting you in command of the advance guard. What do you think?"

Hijikata scowled.

"Why?"

"I don't have much actual combat experience. You do, so I figured you'd be a better fit for the job. Besides, there isn't anyone on our side or theirs who hasn't heard the name Toshizo Hijikata. I can't think of anyone better suited."

Otori's copious praise did nothing to thaw Hijikata, and they simply stared at one another for a few awkward moments.

"Well, then, I suppose I'd better be on my way. We'll talk later, and go over some more in-depth plans."

Their conversation ended as one-sided as it had begun, and Otori disappeared into the swarm of marching soldiers.

â€|

â€|

Later that night we camped a short distance away from the rest of the force.

"Hey, Shimada, Chizuru, get over here. We need to talk."

The main bulk of the Shinsengumi, as well as the Fury Corps were headed to Aizu under Saito's command.

That meant that the only people in camp were myself, Shimada, Hijikata, and about ten other Shinsengumi.

"Remember what the Infantry Magistrate told us earlier?"

Shimada thought for a moment.

"You mean about you taking command of the advance guard?"

Hijikata nodded.

"Yeah. I've been thinking about what I want you guys to do. You can't be in the advance guard, so sooner or later I'm going to send you off to fight with the main body, or the rear guard."

Shimada frowned and glanced at his commander.

"Soâ€|what does that mean? I assume you're going to take him up on his command offer?"

Hijikata sighed.

"Yes. You were at Toba-Fushimi. You'd be a good commander for men who've never seen a real battle. These guys have the theory, but not the experience. We've got the experience, but none of their allegedly superior tactics. So I guess we'll kind of cover each other's asses. Make up for what the other lacks. You guys should be perfect."

Shimada's frown deepened.

"Butâ€|"

Hijikata's logic made sense, but Shimada didn't seem to be very excited about being separated from his commander.

They looked at one another for several silent moments, until Shimada finally nodded.

"I understand. Whatever you order me to do, I'll do. But first, I want you to tell me something. This doesn't mean you're planning to disband the Shinsengumi, does it? If I fight in this, I'll do it as a member of the Shinsengumi. Even if our standard isn't leading me into battle, it's still held high in my heart. Are you all right with that?"

Shimada and I felt the same way it seemed: Hijikata may have given up when we lost Kondou, but not the rest of us.

The meaning wasn't lost on Hijikata, and he looked away uncomfortably before finally mumbling a response.

"Fine. Whatever."

He sounded so dispassionate.

Shimada glanced at me and then back to Hijikata.

"I should also point out that I think commanding soldiers is a little more than she can handle. She doesn't belong on the front line. She's a page, not a soldier. The soldiers wouldn't listen to a woman, even if she knew what to say. I think you should find another post for her. All right, I'll go tell the others what you've decided."

With that, he turned and jogged off toward the rest of the Shinsengumi soldiers.

Hijikata and I were alone.

He sighed and his shoulders drooped. Suddenly he looked very, very tired.

"Um Why did you try to order us away?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he tilted his head back to gaze up at the stars that speckled the night sky.

That long, melancholy silence spoke volumes, but just as I began to regret questioning his decision, he spoke up.

"If I knew Kondou was coming back, then I could go out there ready to give my life to win. But that's out of my hands now. Just like Yamazaki said, Kondou and I were the Shinsengumi. With him gone There's no way in hell I can carry all this on my own."

Hijikata was often rude or cruel when he spoke to me, but I'd never heard him sound so defeated before. And he never talked that way about the Shinsengumi

His shoulders sagged.

Shinpachi was right, wasn't he?"

"Huh?"

"Remember what he said when we decided to go to Koufu Castle? He said there was no way in hell Awanokami Katsu would give us money and weapons without some sort of hidden agenda. He was right. So was Harada. You know who just turned Edo Castle over to the Imperial Army? Awanokami Katsu."

"What?!"

Then that meant the battle in Koufu had been

"He wanted to cozy up the new government, but we would've made that tough, so he had to get rid of us."

He gave a dry laugh, and kicked despondently at a rock near his foot.

"Dammit! Why didn't I see that? If I'd been thinking, there's no way that would've slipped past me. But I was desperate. I wanted Kondou to be off fighting big important battles, winning himself all sorts of glory. I let that blind me. And then we lost the war, and Kondou lost his spirit. All that for nothing."

I didn't know what to say. I had no comforting words.

So I just listened.

The Shinsengumi had put their lives on the line for the shogunate. The shogun should have come to their aid, but instead the Shinsengumi was abandoned, and because of that we'd lost Kondou.

"We busted our asses practicing our swordsmanship until we finally earned our swords. Now we're no match for farmers and peasants from Choshu because they've got guns! Aren't samurai supposed to be the masters of warfare? What the hell have we been fighting so hard for? Is anything I believed in still true? We believed there was something there for us, at the end, so no matter how bad shit got, we just ground our teeth and climbed up that hill. But now it turns out it was just a goddamn hill, and there's nothing there. What the hell are we supposed to do now? What the hell am I supposed to believe in?"

With every word he spoke, I could feel his pain.

It had been Hijikata and Kondou's partnership that had allowed the Shinsengumi to flourish.

But the shogunate had betrayed them, war had changed, and now he felt the world moving on without him.

All that Hijikata had done was fading away, and the pain of that loss was destroying him.

"I think you feel this way because you've lost what you believed in. But the men out there, the few that are left. I think what

they believe in is you. They think that as long as you're there to lead them, they'll be fine, and they refuse to show fear in front of you. They want you to see the kind of men they are, and I think that because of that, they'll fight against men with guns if you tell them to."

I didn't know what else I could say to make him feel better, but I hoped that something I said might help soothe his wounded soul at least a little.

As much as I could, I said what I felt.

"To be honest, I don't really know much about things like the reason the Shinsengumi exists, or what you should believe in. But if somebody asked me why I was here, I'd tell them that it's because I believe in you, Hijikata. So, um."

Maybe that had been the wrong thing to say.

He was worried about what he believed in, not me. All I'd done was probably give him yet another thing to worry about; more pressure.

After all, I was just an observer, and not even a very educated one. How could I even begin to guess what kind of troubles weighed on his mind?

Hijikata turned to look at me, but for once the light in his eyes was soft.

"You're right. If you lose sight of something, the only person who can find it again is you. Besides, we've got a big fight coming up. Guess I should be thinking about how we're going to win that, not whining about my problems."

With a small, crooked smile, he turned back to the stars.

We fell silent again. Worried I'd only make things worse if I spoke, I kept my mouth shut.

The only sounds were nearby bugs, chirping and fluttering in the night.

I was so lost in the calming sounds that I nearly failed to notice Hijikata speaking to me.

"You really planning to stick around?"

I knew he wanted to go alone, but I couldn't go with Shimada, and we both knew it. He couldn't exactly send me away.

"Yes, I am."

Perhaps I didn't know how I could help him just yet, but I could hardly leave him alone.

Hijikata sighed and shifted his gaze back to the stars.

"Fine. Just stay out of my way."

His voice was cold and emotionless.

"Yes, I know."

We stood there, in the silence of the night.

I was a demon. My body healed so quickly that most wounds disappeared almost immediately.

At the moment, I wished that my body was his. But maybe that wouldn't be enough. What Hijikata needed was a body where no scars could form: physical or emotional.

"Gah!"

He moaned suddenly, and bent over in pain.

"H-Hijikata!"

In a matter of seconds, his hair began to turn white.

"L-Let's go over here!"

I lead him into the shadow of a large tree, where the nearby soldiers wouldn't be able to see him.

But

Hopefully, no one would notice us.

"Dammit! Why now?!"

He spoke through gritted teeth, and as I watched his breath began coming in gasps.

Frustration fought for dominance on his face with pain as the bloodlust began to take hold.

"Hijikata But"

I ran toward him, pulling at my collar to loosen it. He grasped my intent and grimaced.

But he took hold of me and pulled me roughly toward him.

I felt a dull sting on the back of my neck, and then the hot trickle of blood.

Then I felt his lips.

"But"

The quiet sound of his drinking filled my ears in the silence of the night.

His warm breath came in pants across the back of my neck, but after a time I felt it begin to steady.

Slowly, his grip loosened.

I could sense the pain leaving his body.

Then, without a word, he pulled away from me.

"How long do you plan to keep letting me do this?"

"What?"

When he looked at me, I saw worry in his eyes.

I smiled back.

"Forever. As long as you need me, I'll be here."

The misery on his face only deepened.

He looked away.

"You're a stupid girl. And I'm a man who's lost sight of what makes him human. How can you just let me cut you open like that and drink your blood? What the hell are you thinking?"

I wanted to scream at him but instead I said, "It's all right, really. I want to do this."

There was nothing for him to say to that.

â€

â€

We were in a forest a short distance away from Utsunomiya, on the way to Nikko, when we heard the news.

"So Utsunomiya has been captured by the Imperial Army? That's unexpected."

Hijikata and Otori had stopped to talk over their next move after the scouts had brought the news of Utsunomiya's fall. Otori looked quite serious, but Hijikata looked utterly unimpressed.

"Captured? More like they were scared enough of the Imperial Army to just bend over and take it. We show 'em we're scarier, they'll come running back. I mean, we are allowed to take castles that have capitulated, right Mister Infantry Magistrate, Sir?"

Otori pursed his lips and frowned at Hijikata.

"It's not that I'm against going into battle. We are leading an army, after all. But the main body and the rear guard are still on their way from Oyama. All I'm asking is that you wait until they catch up with us."

His expression softened slightly.

"Attempting to lay siege to a castle is folly beyond folly. We should-

Hijikata gave a heavy sigh.

"What kind of flowery drill manual did you pull that gem from? Your favorite western artillery book?"

Otori's frown deepened into a scowl.

"I don't just study western tactics, you know. Sun Tzu said much the same thing in the Art of War. Thus the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans, the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces, the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field, and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities. In other words, we should only lay siege to the castle as a last resort. Attacking it head-on is foolish. If you're determined to be a fool, the best you can do is make sure your army is in the best condition possible, and-"

"Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays. There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare. Remember that one? He's saying that it might get a little messy, but it's better to end your battles quick. Taking your sweet time just comes back to bite you in the ass."

"Hijikataâ€¦ Please don't do that. I'm not asking you to wait long. They should be here in just a few days."

Hijikata was quickly growing more annoyed.

"Yeah? And what're you gonna do if we're here twiddling our thumbs waiting for the rest of your me when the Imperial Army shows up? If the Satsuma of Choshu bring out their big guns, then we're screwed, no two way about it."

"Wellâ€¦"

For the first time, he didn't have a ready rebuttal, and Hijikata pushed ahead.

"You want to miss this opportunity, fine. I'll just take the advance guard and capture the castle myself."

Otori's eyes snapped wide.

"You'd have to be crazy to do that! That's suicide!"

His voice rose in shock, but Hijikata just snorted derisively.

"Suicide? Fine. Bring it on. It's easy enough to deal with a man who's fighting for his life, but try fighting a man who doesn't care if he lives or dies."

His eyes shone with the excitement of a new challenge.

â€¦No, it was something else. What I saw in his eyes wasn't a man rising to a challenge, but the mad glint of a man who was no longer interested in living.

"Well, I guess we'll see. I'll take Utsunomiya Castle by tomorrow."

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral grin and he looked off toward Utsunomiya.

With Hijikata like this, could we really win?

“

“

April 19th.

Utsunomiya Castle was in turmoil.

Our forces numbered around 2,000, while the castle had barely 700 guardsmen.

The battle for Shimogawara Gate was especially intense, with 1,000 shogunate troops against only 400 guards.

Although the shogunate soldiers easily outnumbered their opponents, the guards were able to use their defense fortifications to great effect, fighting the invaders to a stand-still.

Guns cracked and bullets flew across the battlefield as men screamed in pain.

Hijikata turned to face the 200 men now under his direct command.

"We can't keep this up. I guess this is as good a time as any to attack the enemy line."

The soldiers started to speak out in fear.

"A-Attack? What are you saying?! They have guns!"

Hijikata scowled at them.

"Guns? You haven't seen guns until you've seen the ones the Satsuma-Choshu Alliance has. They can hit a man from almost 200 meters away. Those guns out can barely manage 80. Besides, taking a bullet or two won't kill you."

Another soldier spoke out in fear.

"Th-That's crazy!"

The men stared back at him, stunned. Never would they have imagined that they might be given orders like these.

Hijikata, on the other hand, stared back at them coldly.

"What the hell did you come here to do? Last I checked, it was fight a war. If you're prepared to fight, you should be prepared to die. Am I wrong? So when I give the word, you're going to charge that line!"

He pointed toward the source of the bullets raining down on the battlefield.

Hijikata's men turned pale, and many of them began to tremble. Eventually, one of them snapped.

"I-I can't do this! I don't want to die here!"

He broke, and turned to run.

Hijikata flicked his eyes to him.

"Hnn!"

Hijikata's sword leapt from its scabbard and sliced across the back of the fleeing man.

"G-Gaaah!"

He fell to the ground, dead.

The men watching swallowed. For a few short moments, they were utterly silent.

"H-Hey! He just killed one of his own men!"

"What is this? Is he crazy?!"

Hijikata let his cold eyes slide slowly across their ranks, and slowly the mumbling ceased.

"Anyone else want to run? If you're too scared to fight, go ahead. be my guest. But anyone who runs will die by this sword. So either I kill youâ€¦ Or you take your chance out there. up to you."

His eyes were cold and dead. Not a man there believed for a moment that he wouldn't kill them without a second thought.

"That man is a monsterâ€¦"

With one final scowl, Hijikata turned back to the battlefield, and took off across it.

He ran through the hail of bullets, and fell upon the men defending the gate like a vengeful god.

"Argh!"

"Gah!"

His beloved sword, the Izuminokami Kanesada, dripped with fresh blood, but he swung it again and again, oblivious or uncaring.

I hid myself in the shadows, and watched.

"Hijikata! Just a little more, and we might be able to take this gate!" shouted Shimada.

His face was smeared with dirt and blood as he ran up toward the commander.

Hijikata gave his friend a blood-smeared smile.

"Great! Keep it up! I believe in you, Shimada!"

The guards fired desperately, but as Hijikata had said, their guns were old and inaccurate.

Attacking men with guns head-on was a frightening prospect, but Hijikata seemed to be utterly unconcerned as he dodged and wove through them, his sword ending lives with each stroke.

As a fury, he wasn't likely to die from a gunshot wound unless it struck a vital organ, and he healed so quickly that bullets were largely a temporary discomfort.

Still, even if he'd been only human, I didn't doubt that he would have run into that hail of bullets just as fearlessly.

His hair hadn't gone white yet, but it was still afternoon. It should have been difficult for him to even standâ€¦

But to watch him fight, you would never have known.

"A-Amazingâ€¦"

"Is he even human? He looks more like a demon straight from hellâ€¦"

The mood among the men watching Hijikata fight began to change.

None of them had likely ever seen a man fight so fearlessly in the face of gunfire, or even at all.

His eyes glowed out from his blood-drenched face, and his arm never slowed.

"C'mon men! It looks like they're running out of bullets! How 'bout you grow a pair and get over here!"

He took a moment to roar over shoulder before turning back to the important task of killing guards.

His fearless charge seemed to have had an effectâ€¦

"Iâ€¦I think we might be able to do itâ€¦ I think we might be able to win this fight!"

"Y-Yeahâ€¦ Yeah, you're right! We might be able to do it! Just follow the Shinsengumi-no, follow Hijikata!"

As their morale rose, so did their determination, and the fighting along the gate grew more intense.

Then, just after the sun had passed its zenith-

"It's opening! The castle gate is opening!"

"Did we do it? Did we win?!"

The news spread along the line like wildfire.

Hijikata also paused to stare at the opening gate.

"Took a little longer than I thought, butâ€¦ Well, no, guess this's just about right."

At least he relaxed, and I saw a grin of victory on his face.

Shimada and I joined him.

"That was amazing, commander! You really are a true samurai! Watching you run straight into those bulletsâ€¦ I'm in awe!"

"Heh. Kissing my ass isn't gonna get you anywhere, Kai. Besides, the castle still hasn't really fallen. Can't let our guard down."

I gave a quick nod.

"Rightâ€¦ Huh?"

Before we'd realized it, the soldiers who'd been so reluctant to fight not so long ago had surrounded us, all of them speaking to one another in excited murmurs.

"Sir, that was amazing! It was like you were Yoshitsune Minamoto reborn! You are truly the commander of the Shinsengumi!"

"We had you all wrong, sir! We're so sorry! You only killed that man so that you could lead us to victory! You did it to insure none of us would leave!"

"Sir, it is an honor to fight under you! You are a true samurai!"

The curiosity and fear we'd seen on their faces when we first men was gone now, replaced with respect and adulation.

Shimada's eyes flicked from soldier to soldier.

"Wh-What's gotten into them?"

Hijikata gave an irritated sigh.

Now that the battle was over, Hijikata was beginning to look a little ill, and his mood was souring with his health.

I placed a careful hand on his arm.

"Are you all right?"

He'd pushed himself so hard, and during daylight hours, that his body had likely reached its limit.

Besides, he'd been showered with who knew how much bloodâ€¦ The bloodlust might start up at any moment.

It seemed that only sheer force of will kept him standing.

"Course I'm fine. Can't die till the castle falls."

He rubbed a fist across his face, wiping away sweat and blood at the same time, then turned back to the soldiers.

"All right men, follow me! We're going to attack the castle before dawn!"

"Yes, sir!"

â€|

â€|

Dawn came, and Hijikata led the advance guard in an attack on Utsunomiya Castle itself. Their previous cowardice now forgotten, his troops fell upon the castle's defenders with great vigor.

"They keep this up, taking this castle might be easier than I thought."

Hijikata looked at me with a slight grin just as Shimada appeared.

"Hijikata! The men we sent to the banquet hall ran into trouble!"

"What? We haven't seen any real resistance so far."

Shimada frowned.

"I don't know the details. Should I go seeâ€|?"

Hijikata slowly shook his head.

"No. I'll go. I'm leaving you in charge here."

"Yes, sir!"

I glanced at Hijikata.

"Um, Hijikata, what should I doâ€|?"

"Come with me. Don't want you wandering around. Might get hit by a stray bullet or something."

"O-Okayâ€|"

â€|

â€|

Even before we stepped into the banquet hall, I knew something was wrong.

Inside, our men were dead on the floor, their bodies laid out like the spokes of a wheel. And at the hub of that wheelâ€|

Hijikata gave a heavy irritated sigh.

"What're you doing here? Decided you'd take a vacation? You do know there's a war out there, right? Or maybe you're just hiding out here,

hoping you won't get hurt."

The only two men still standing in the banquet hall weren't strangers.

They were Kazama and Amagiri, the demons.

"Wh-Why are you here?"

Kazama smirked at me but it was Amagiri who answered.

"We are acting under orders from the Satsuma Domain. We are here to deliver a secret message. We did not expect to be drawn into battle here. |And we certainly did not expect to encounter you."

Hijikata seemed more amused than concerned.

"Oh, I get it. The new government says 'Bend over,' and you guys say 'How far?' Well, you're sure dedicated. You've got my respect."

Kazama sneered back.

"Well, I didn't think I'd see you again so soon, Hijikata. |Or whatever your name is."

His eyes glittered like a pair of rubies.

Hijikata folded his arms, his expression unchanged.

"Didn't think you were so anxious to get your face all cut up again. Oh, don't worry, I'm happy to oblige."

"Damn you!"

Kazama ground his teeth, and drew the sword slung at his hip.

It wasn't the sword he'd worn the last time we'd met.

This one shone in a strange, disquieting way, almost as if it simply generated its own light rather than reflecting what hit it.

I found myself unable to look away.

"Killing you will erase the humiliation I suffered at your hand. You and your minions have been a thorn in my side since Kyoto. Today, I will have my revenge. Amagiri, you stay out of this. He's mine."

Amagiri sighed and gave a miniscule shrug.

"As you wish|"

He padded to a corner and folded his arms in silence.

"Huh. Guess the face wasn't enough, huh? Maybe if I take an arm this time you'll get the message."

White washed across Hijikata's hair.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!"

He leapt across the room at Kazama like a bullet from a gun.

"Heh."

Kazama blocked Hijikata's strike calmly, and their blades rattled against one another.

Then Kazama pushed back and Hijikata was thrown across the room.

"You're not getting away."

In the blink of an eye, he leapt after his opponent and whipped out his sword in a quick slash.

"Gah!"

Hijikata brought up the Kanesada at the last moment, catching Kazama's strike before it could hit him.

"You're slow. You're movements lackâ€¦finesse. Don't tell me that killing humans has tired you out? I thought you said something last time about being a demonâ€¦"

"Hnng! Gkk!"

Hijikata's sword began to shake. Kazama's edged closer.

He was right, though. Even with fury-enhanced speed and strength, Hijikata was slower than before; less focused.

"Ahâ€¦ I see. The sun's still up, isn't it? And you don't like the sun much, do you?"

A cruel, arrogant grin spread across his face, filled with altogether too many teeth.

"Well, don't worry. I won't go easy just because you're weak. After all, a samurai always gives all he can, no matter the situation. That is your code, isn't it?"

"D-Damn you!"

Hijikata leapt backwards, but he wasn't fast enough.

Kazama's sword licked out.

"Gah!"

The glowing blade traced a brilliant red line across his chest. Blood erupted and splattered to the floor as Hijikata dropped to his knees.

"Aaah!"

His breath came in raspy pants.

The front of his shirt began to turn red, and drops of blood fell to the floor beneath him.

But he'd be okay. He was a fury. Any moment now, the bleeding would stopâ€|

"Huhâ€|?"

â€|But it didn't. Agonizing seconds stretched on, and still blood flowed from Hijikata's chest.

"Wh-What is this?!"

"Hehâ€| Hahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahaha! What's the matter?! Not healing like you should?"

Kazama's grin spread even wider, and he hefted his sword.

"This sword is Yasutsuna's Demonslayer. It was used by the legendary Yorimitsu Minamoto to kill the demon down as Shutendouji. It's been passed down through the Kazama family for generations, butâ€| No one has ever thought to test it on a demon. This seemed like an excellent chance to see what it could do. And do you know? I get to use it to put down a fake demon."

Hijikata met Kazama's gloating smirk in kind.

"Hehâ€| Must be getting pretty desperate if you're willing to grab your family's magic sword. Really need something like that to take on a fake demon?"

He gave a taunting laugh, but Kazama's grin didn't even twitch.

"You humiliated me for the first time in my life. Nothing is too much, if it well send you to hell. Your 'abilities' can't heal the wounds this sword gives you. You became a fury to defeat me, but now that sacrifice means nothing."

"Hehâ€|"

If Hijikata was concerned, he was hiding it wellâ€|

He prodded experimentally at the wound on his chest, then climbed slowly to his feet.

"Soâ€|tell me if I've got this right. All I have to do is avoid getting cut by that thing? Hell, before I became a fury, all I did was dodge swords. This'll be easy."

"Does your impudence know no boundsâ€|?"

Kazama gave a bored sigh.

"Fine. I'll put your short-lived defiance to the test."

The Demonslayer's blade flickered with a blue-white light, and almost seemed to shiver in concert with Kazama's murderous intent.

Suddenly the air seemed thick and oppressive. It was an effort just to breathe, and when I looked at Kazama, my skin began to crawl.

His sword dropped toward Hijikata-

"Hnn!"

He dodged the Demonslayer, albeit only barely, and brought his own sword up to strike back-

But when the Kanesada arrived, Kazama had simply disappeared.

â€|No, I realized, he hadn't disappeared: he was simply moving too fast for the eye to see. Hijikata seemed to be able to keep up, but the margin for error was slim, and getting slimmer.

"Gaaah!"

Kazama dodged Hijikata's attack with ease, and his riposte slammed into the other man's shoulder, tearing his shirt away to display a fresh, ragged wound.

"Good, goodâ€| Your mind os working desperately, trying to discover how you might kill me. Good, butâ€| I want to see more. I want to see your face when you finally realize that you cannot defeat me! That you will die!"

"Gah!"

Blood poured from his wounds, but Hijikata brought his sword up in time to catch the Demonslayer.

"Graaaaaah!"

â€|But he'd lost too much blood, and his body was beginning to weaken.

"Aaaah!"

Kazama Overpowered him, and Hijikata was thrown back.

Then as if things hadn't gotten bad enoughâ€|

"Wh-What the hell?!"

The white had disappeared from Hijikata's hair.

"Ahahahahaha! Reached your limit, I see! Even a false demon is better than this pathetic existence! You might as well be an insect-no, a worm!"

Kazama's maniacal laugh echoed through the room as he gloated over the nearly-unconscious Hijikata.

"Now I want to hear you cry! Scream! Beg me for your life, maggot! You and your filth have stood in my way ever since we met in Kyoto. I'll kill you, and erase the Shinsengumi!"

Hijikata's head twitched.

"Erase the Shinsengumiâ€|? Youâ€|"

He'd lost so much bloodâ€¦ I was amazed he was conscious, let alone lucid, but as I watched hands dug into the floor mat like claws-almost as if he were keeping himself up through sheer force of will.

"After we left Kondou, and the Shinsengumi fell to me, I felt like there was no way I could do all that by myself. I was just about ready to give it all up."

The white rushed back through his hair.

"â€¦But now, when you say you want to just erase everything we didâ€¦ I'll be goddamned if I let you destroy the Shinsengumi!"

Blood poured from his shoulder and his chest, but still he struggled to stand.

The sight of him was so powerful; so tragic, that I couldn't bear to watch.

If he didn't stop, he would die!

I had to do something!

"Hijikata, no! You're hurt, badly! If you use your fury powersâ€¦!"

His eyes flicked to me for a moment, and I could see that his mind was already made up.

Then they were gone, and he glared at Kazama.

"You really think I care how much of my future I've gotta burn to get this bastard. I can't let him kill me here. I've risked my life for the Shinsengumi. I can't let this bastard and his damn sword get the best of me now!"

Kazama sneered.

"You're practically dead already. What do you intend to do? This charade is pathetic."

Kazama swung his sword again, almost lazily.

"Aaagh!"

Hijikata tried to lift up his Kanesada in time to block, but his right hand refused to respond, and Kazama's sword slammed into his right shoulder.

He let out a strangled scream as his arm twitched in pain, his sword tumbling from his grasp.

Hijikata's clothes were soaked in blood, and his skin was the color of paper. Only rage and pure willpower kept him upright, but even they were beginning to waver.

"â€¦I'd hoped you might give me a little more entertainment, but I suppose it's time for me to say goodbye now. Shame you don't have enough energy to talk. I miss that dry wit."

Hijikata's shoulders shuddered with each labored breath, but still he glared at Kazama.

"What's the matter? Can't hold your sword anymore? Where's that samurai spirit, hm?"

"Gnnnh!"

He could barely even breath, but still Hijikata raised his sword toward Kazama.

The tip of the blade dipped and waved, and blood poured from his wounds, but still he stood.

Please, I silently begged, just stop. Don't die!

Just looked at him was enough to make me want to scream.

Kazama lifted that cruel sword, slick with Hijikata's blood, and smiled.

"Oh, how I've waited for his moment! At last, I can kill you with my own hands and erase the humiliation you gave me!"

Then suddenly an ear-splitting detonation tore through the building. The wood of the castle creaked and moaned, and I could smell something burning.

"What is this?!"

Suddenly distracted, Kazama flicked his gaze around the room, Looking for the source of the interruption.

"Fire! Fire! Those cowardly sons-of-bitches set this damn castle on fire when they ran!"

"We're dead if it catches us! C'mon, we have to get out of here!"

The fire spread quickly, and in mere moments the roar of it was deafening. Flames began to lick at the walls of the banquet hall.

"*Cough* *Cough*"

Black smoke poured into the room, rough and irritating in my throat.

The flames leapt to the dry wood and paper of the door, and then to the flammable mats covering the floor. Almost immediately the room was plunged into nigh-unbearable heat, but neither Hijikata nor Kazama lowered his sword.

Both men were waiting for a chance to strike. If either made even the smallest wrong move, he would be cut to ribbons by the other.

Tension filled the air until it was as thick as the acrid smoke.

"Gah!"

With a crackling roar and the moan of tortured wood, a section of ceiling collapsed to the floor between them.

"Urgh!"

Kazama let out a low snarl.

"Dammit! This place is coming apart. If I stay any longer, I'll be in danger as well!"

He shoved the Demonslayer back into its scabbard angrily, and glared across the flaming wreckage at Hijikata.

"Hiji! whatever your name is, I'll let you go, this time. We'll finish this duel another day. And on that day, I'll finish what we started here. You will die."

With on last grotesque, inhuman smile, Kazama disappeared.

"H-Hijikata!"

I ran to him. His face was twisted in pain, and his skin looked like wax.

Practically forgotten until now, Amagiri walked toward us from his corner, seemingly unconcerned with the flames around him.

"The demon clan no longer intend to involve themselves in you governmental squabbles."

Hijikata looked up at him confused. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"Why?"

"We owed favors to the Satsuma Domain. We feel that we have now repaid those favors. Besides, even you must know that the shogun will soon fall, regardless of whatever my kin and I do to speed that fall."

Hijikata gave a disturbingly humorless laugh.

"!"

His face curled up in a bitter smile.

"!Yeah."

"And yet you intend to remain aboard this sinking ship? The Tokugawa never gave your Shinsengumi the recognition it so desired, and betrayed you when you needed them most. Why do you remain loyal?"

The truth of Amagiri's words drove a knife into Hijikata's heart, and I saw his face fall.

He replied with a sad smile.

"Well, a samurai fights for their lord no matter what, right? What I'm fighting for now isn't Yoshinobu, or Edo Castle, or any of those cowards that call themselves the shogunate's ministers. What I'm-â€|No, what we're fighting for now is the shogunate in here, in our hearts, and the Shinsengumi that we made to protect that. It's not easy, not by a long shot, butâ€| I'd feel like a real bastard if I let it die before Kondou comes backâ€|"

"â€|"

Amagiri closed his eyes while Hijikata spoke. No he stood silent for a moment, then slowly opened them.

"If Kazama chooses to involve himself with either of you again, he will have betrayed the moral code that binds all our kind. He will no longer have the support of the clans. He will be on his own. I imagine this will be of little concern to him, but I ask you to bear in mind when he next assaults you that he is not doing so at the behest of the demon clans. He is, I fear, your problem nowâ€|"

Then Amagiri turned and disappeared.

"Gahâ€|"

At last, Hijikata collapsed, although from relief or simple exhaustion, I couldn't tell.

"Hijikata!"

But he had passed out.

No matter how much I shook him, or cried his name, he refused to open his eyes.

"*Cough* *Cough*"

The fire had grown more intense, and I was beginning to sweat in earnest.

If we didn't get out, and soon, we would both burn to death. But how could I move Hijikata?! He was far too heavy for me to carry on my own.

"Commander! Yukimura! Where are you?!"

From down the hall came Shimada's voice. In that moment, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard.

"Shimada! We're over here! Hijikata isâ€|isâ€|!"

Moments later, Shimada burst through the door, scattering sparks and burning fragments across the room.

"C-Commander?! Hang on! I'll get you out of here!"

"He just passed out a minute ago, but he's lost a lot of blood! If he doesn't get treated soon, he'llâ€|he'llâ€|"

"Right. Okay, I'll carry him! You'll have to follow behind me! Try not to inhale too much of this smoke!"

Without ever waiting for my reply, Shimada hefted Hijikata onto his back and set off at a jog.

"Okay!"

â€|

â€|

In the end, it didn't matter.

The castle that Hijikata had risked his own life to take was taken back by the Imperial Army only four days later, with nearly 20,000 soldiers from the Satsuma, Choushu, Ogaki, and Tottori domains.

After the battle, Otori and the rest of his soldiers set out for Aizu.

Hijikata had miraculously survived his ordeal, but he was by no means recovered. He drifted in and out of consciousness for days, hovering at death's door, and was eventually sent away from the front to Nikko, so he could recover.

â€|

â€|

Since we'd arrived in Nikko, I'd busied myself doing my best to take care of him.

As a fury, most normal medication had little to no effect on him. Most of my nursing therefore consisted of fervently hoping that his natural strength and tenacity would bring him through.

Fortunately, my prayers seemed to pay off, and in time his wounds began to heal, although those made by Kazama's Demonslayer did not do so easily, or quickly.

I found myself thinking back to the battle of Utsunomiya.

After watching Hijikata in battle, the same soldiers who had been too frightened to fight just minutes before had run to cross swords with the enemy.

Afterward, they had told him that it was an honor to fight alongside the Shinsengumi, for they were true samurai.

Hijikataâ€| You are the core of the Shinsengumi.

Without you, there is no Shinsengumi.

So pleaseâ€| You can't die.

Several days later, I walked into Hijikata's room to change his bandage and was brought up short by what I saw.

"Hijikata! What are you doing?!"

He'd recovered some-enough to move and speak without pain-but he was still confined to his bed.

Or at least, he was supposed to be.

"When I said you were healthy enough to get up, I didn't mean you were healthy enough to work!"

"It'll only take a minute. I'm going back to bed as soon as I finish thisâ€|"

His voice was as dismissive as it had always been. He flicked a hand in my direction, as if to brush me off.

"You nearly died! You need to rest!"

"Died? Me? Hah. That was nothing. Barely a scratch."

"Barely a scratch?! Do you know how long I've been taking care of you?!"

He continued to write, bot even bothering to look up.

"Gaaah. Fine, fine."

I'd hoped for a little more contrition, but it appeared I was going to have to take what I could get.

"Well, at least let me put this on you. You're going to catch a chill."

As I spoke, I draped his old jacket across his shoulders.

"Hrmph. As if you'd listen if I didn't 'let' you."

"I'm glad to see you understand how this works. Now, as soon as you've finished that, you're going straight back into bed. And don't even think about working behind my back. I've got my eye on you!"

At last, Hijikata turned and looked at me, his face quirked in a small, bitter smile.

"All right, fine. Sorry for putting you through all that trouble."

He wasâ€|more polite than I'd expected.

"Huhâ€|?"

Had I heard wrong? I stared back at him intently.

"Guess I should be thanking you and Shimada, huh? Wellâ€| I appreciate what you did. Thanks."

Hijikata's thanks were rarely unaccompanied by cynicism, sarcasm, or outright derision, but thisâ€|

What had come over him? He was strangely genuine.

"Something wrong? Whatâ€¦ Did I say something funny?"

"Oh! No no no. It's not thatâ€¦"

It was more that I'd never seen Hijikata act soâ€¦ nice.

Later that nightâ€¦

"So the commander's really back on his feet?!"

"I also heard he'd improved, so I thought I'd stop by and pay him a visit."

"Good evening Shimada, Otori. Hijikata is over-"

Before I could even finish, Shimada dashed past me to Hijikata's side.

"I'm so glad you're all right, sir! For a while there, I really didn't know what was going to happen."

Shimada's eyes began to tear up and he blinked rapidly to clear them.

"C'mon, don't gimme that. You really think I'd die so easy?"

"Y-You're right! You'll never die! No matter what happens!"

He rubbed his hand across his face awkwardly, trying to brush away the tears that refused to stop forming.

"Hijikataâ€¦" Otori started. "I'm going to be honest with you. You fought like a demon back at Utsunomiya. Morale is through the roof. the whole army won't stop talking about you. Butâ€¦ Your actions were dangerous and idiotic! You are a commanding officer, not a soldier! You don't belong on the front line!"

Shimada glanced worriedly at his commander before turning back to Otori.

"O-Otori, he's only just recoveredâ€¦ Don't you think you're being a little harsh-"

"Oh no, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind! I won't let this slide!"

Otori turned back to Hijikata.

"Listen to me, Hijikata. Westernizing our troops isn't just about giving them guns and new clothes. We have to change how we think about war. We have to learn new tactics. The commander charging at the front of the army does not show that we are improving our strategy! The soldiers are the hands and feet, then their commanding officer is the head. If the head is removed, it doesn't matter how much of the body remains-the war will be lost!"

Hijikata's eyes snapped wide open.

Otori continued, oblivious, but I knew what Hijikata was thinking.

He was remembering when Yamazaki had given his life to save him.

"What are you doing, Commander?! You are the mind of the Shinsengumi! We're your arms and legs! Why are you running off to face the enemy aloneâ€|? If you lose an arm or a leg, you can always replace it. But if you lose the head, you lose everything."

The day Hijikata had become a fury, Yamazaki had said very nearly the same words to him.

His lips curled into a bitter smile.

"Hehâ€| Almost feels like Yamazaki's come back to yell at me, huhâ€|"

His words were to himself, and there was a faraway look in his eyes.

Otori frowned, confused.

"Hey! Hijikata! What's so funny? This is serious! Don't you understand how worried I was about you? Hell, how worried the whole army was about you?!"

Hijikata said nothing and for a few moments he simply stared at Otori. Normally, he would have fired back with sarcasm, or perhaps outright insults, if he was in a bad enough mood. But thisâ€|

Otori frowned.

"S-Say whatever you want! It won't change my mind!"

It wasn't easy to seem threatening around someone like Hijikata, but he tried.

Hijikata closed his eyes and gave a heavy sigh.

"You're right, Otori. Sorry for worrying you."

He then followed his surprisingly genuine apology with a similarly surprising bow.

Otori blinked in disbelief.

"Wh-Whatâ€|?"

He clearly prepared himself for a variety of reactions from Hijikata, but this had apparently not been one of them.

For several moments he simply stood there, too flabbergasted to speak.

Hijikata gave another bitter smile as he glanced at Shimada.

"My apologies to you too, Shimada. I hear you had to carry me all the way here."

Shimada blinked taken aback.

"Oh...no! No, it was nothing! Anything for you, sir!"

He seemed just as confused as Otori by Hijikata's sudden change.

I didn't understand it either, but there was no denying that he was different.

18. Chapter 8

CHAPTER 8

July 1868

...

Spring ended, and summer began.

The battle between the old government forces and the Imperial Army moved to Aizu.

The rumors said that the fighting was intense.

Although he hadn't healed completely, Hijikata decided to leave Nikko as soon as he was well enough to march.

The trip was long on foot, but without any problems.

Eventually, we arrived at Shirakawa Castle, one of the main rally points for our troops.

At last, we had caught up with the main body of the Shinsengumi.

Saito was there to greet us the moment we arrived at the castle.

"Chief Hijikata! I'm grateful to see you alive."

As good as it was to see Saito, he seemed somewhat worse for wear.

Battle after pitched battle had taken its toll on his body.

Hijikata smiled.

"Glad to see you're all right too. I hear you did well."

Then he frowned and rubbed his hand at his forehead.

"...But if you could stop calling me 'Chief'!"

He looked Saito straight in the eye.

"I'm not the chief, and gods willing I never will be. I'd be terrible. Kondou is the only chief of the Shinsengumi."

Saito met his gaze without blinking.

"I do not intend to correct myself. It is your job to unify the Shinsengumi."

There was something odd about Saito's tone.

Hijikata seemed to sense it too, and I could see him preparing to ask when Saito continued, his voice calm and measured.

"Chief Kondou has passed away."

"What?"

I suddenly felt sick.

Hijikata only stared at Saito, his eyes suddenly wide.

I didn't want to believe what I'd just heard was true. Perhaps Saito had been...confused.

"The only person who can rise to the position of Chief is you, Hijikata."

He was qualified, certainly-both by position and action. But

"I-Is...is Kondou really?"

My voice shook as I spoke.

How could he say such a thing and then just move on? If Kondou was really dead, didn't that deserve a moment or two?

Saito glanced at me.

"Kondou is"

He then glanced over at Hijikata, his eyes asking whether or not he should continue.

"Tell me what happened, Saito."

Hijikata's voice was clipped and tight.

Saito held his gaze for a moment longer, then nodded.

"We have been told that at the end of April, Chief Kondou was beheaded at the Itabashi execution site."

I swallowed.

He hadn't even been give the chance to retain his honor and take his own life. He'd simply been beheaded, like a common criminal.

Perhaps Hijikata had expected that

"Hrm. Didn't even let him kill himself"

His voice was controlled and unsurprised, but

Deep within his eyes, I could see a bottomless, yawning despair.

Whatever facade he might erect, Kondou's death had been a blow straight to his heart. He would not recover from it easily.

Later that night, Heisuke and Sanan came to visit Hijikata.

As members of the Fury Corps, they had been resting when we arrived in the afternoon.

Sanan glanced up from where he was resting.

"Your arrival has the castle in something of an uproar. It woke me somewhat earlier than usual."

His smile was unreadable, but Heisuke's emotions were not so difficult to determine.

"I heard you got hurt pretty bad, Hijikata. Didn't think we'd see you again so soon."

Hijikata gave him a bitter smile.

"Well, I couldn't just sit on my ass once I heard there were battles happening all over the place."

He sounded calm and relaxed enough, but I knew he wasn't that way on the inside.

I'd felt depressed ever since we learned that Kondou had passed away, but that was nothing compared to what Hijikata had to be feeling.

Sanan glanced at Hijikata then back to Heisuke.

"We should be on our way, then. Our work begins at night, after all."

Heisuke nodded.

They were halfway to the door when Hijikata spoke.

Oh, yeah. Heisuke, you think you could tell Saito to come by?"

Heisuke turned back a bit startled.

"Huh? Uh, sureâ€¦ I'll go do that right now."

He cocked an eyebrow in question, but when no further explanation seemed forthcoming he simply nodded.

"Hijikata, you only just got here. You really should rest tonight."

He gave Hijikata a quick grin, then turned and left.

With Heisuke and Sanan gone, the room fell into a somewhat awkward

silence.

Hijikata hadn't told me to leave, but it seemed unlikely that he would start talking to me either.

"Umâ€¦"

I'd opened my mouth to speak in a desperate attempt to break the silence, when the door slid open and Saito stepped in.

Without even waiting for him to sit, Hijikata began to speak.

"From now on, I'll be commanding from the front line."

I nearly shrieked.

"What?!"

If we were to be fighting on the front line, the violence would be intense. Hijikata still hadn't fully healedâ€¦ Was he healthy enough to put himself in that kind of danger?

"Do you intend to die in battle?"

Saito's face betrayed no emotion.

"â€¦No, I won't go out that easy. You've been out there. Only right for the chief to take that burden off you, right?"

The chief heading to the front line would raise morale, that was certain, butâ€¦

Hijikata was the core of the Shinsengumi. If he died, they would collapse.

"You raise an excellent point, sir," Saito said, calmly. "If you mean to take my place, howeverâ€¦"

The air suddenly felt thick as Saito's hand fell to his sword.

"â€¦I must first ask that you defeat me. If you cannot best me, then only death awaits you on the front lines."

My eyes went wide.

"Saito?!"

But Hijikata only shook his head and smiled.

"Heh. Getting a little full of yourself without me around to put you in your place?"

His mouth twisted into a grin as his sword slid from its scabbard.

"Hijikata, not you too!"

They didn't mean to kill one another of course, butâ€¦

"Please, stop this! You're friends! You shouldn't be fighting each

other!"

Hijikata turned his eyes to me, and they were as cold as ice.

"You. Shut up, and stay out of this."

"Hijikata?"

He wasn't going to listen to me; that much was clear. All I could do was be silent and watch.

They stood for several long seconds unmoving.

Then, in the same moment, they both exploded into motion.

Swords collided.

They struggled for a moment, swords grinding, until-

"What?!"

Hijikata was thrown back to sprawl across the floor.

Even only partially healed, he still had far greater strength than a human, and he wasn't the sort of person to have gone easy on Saito.

Saito's hair had gone white and his eyes blood red.

He wouldn't

"This war is not so easy that you might rush to the front line without your full strength."

I blinked, finding this sight hard to digest.

"Saito?"

There was no doubt that Saito was a fury.

"Did you drink the Water of Life?"

His eyes flicked to mine.

"Don't you worry yourself with me. I made my own decision."

"?"

I didn't know what to say.

The simple fact that Saito had become a fury said more about the battles he'd been fighting than words ever could.

His crimson gaze returned to Hijikata.

"I understand why it is that you wish to fight. That is why I cannot allow you to."

There was a calm finality to Saito's voice as he slid his sword back

into its scabbard.

"Perhaps you would be able to forget your pain in the midst of battleâ€¦ But I can't afford to let you do that. You cannot be permitted to turn a blind eye to our problems."

Hijikata slowly put his own sword away, then stood silently, looking into Saito's eyes.

"Becauseâ€¦ I'm the chief now?"

Saito's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Because you're the one who can unify the Shinsengumi."

He sighed.

"Leave the front line to us. You, Hijikata, should remain here and plan out our strategies."

Hijikata's eyes narrowed.

"Fine. The front line's yours till my wounds heal."

Saito gave him an almost imperceptible smile.

"Thank you."

Then he turned to face me.

"Umâ€¦ yes?"

"I leave Hijikata in your care. Don't let him out of your sight until he's healthy again."

"â€¦ Right!"

I nodded and gave Saito what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

He inclined his head to me, turned to Hijikata to bow, and then left.

As soon as he was gone, Hijikata's face darkened and his brows drew together.

"So Saito thinks I need a babysitter, huh?"

I frowned at him.

"He's just worried about you. That's all."

I didn't really know how effective of a, well, babysitter I could be, but Saito had put his trust in me. I had to at least give it my best shot.

"I know you're anxious to get back into battle, but you need to rest, all right?"

He gave a bitter laugh, then suddenly stopped.

"Gah-?!"

He clapped a hand to his stomach in pain.

"Hijikata?!"

He started to shake, and his hair and eyes changed color. The bloodlust had taken hold of him and he began to moan in pain.

"Hijikata, umâ€¦"

I moved toward him, and I saw in his eyes that he already understood.

I tugged at my collar, loosening it like it'd done before.

He bent toward me, and I felt a sharp pain on my neck.

"â€¦"

I stayed as still as I could. His hot breath panted across my neck, but as he drank it slowly began to calm and I felt relief wash over me.

If I could take away even a little of his pain this way, then I wanted to do so.

Eventually, he pulled back. There was pain on his face, but not from the bloodlust.

"This can't go on foreverâ€¦"

"Huhâ€¦?"

His mouth twitched up into a sour half-smile.

"You. Me. This war. â€¦Everythingâ€¦"

"Hijikataâ€¦"

His eyes were distant, and he didn't even seem to hear me.

I couldn't find the words to describe it, but something feltâ€¦strange. Wrong.

By the time Hijikata's injuries had fully healed, it was nearly mid-August.

Battle still raged across the Aizu Domain, but little by little the advantage seemed to be moving to the Imperial Army. Our troops were being driven into a corner.

Then one day, Shimada burst into the room, gasping for breath.

"I've got news from Otori!"

Immediately, all eyes were on him. News from Otori meant that something serious had happened.

"He said we're going to mount a counterattack in Sendai."

Sendai was the leader of the Northern Alliance.

In other words, they were allies to the Aizu, as well as the troops loyal to the former shogunate.

Unfortunately, it was only a matter of time before the Aizu men on the front line fell to the Imperial Army, so the leaders of our army had decided to gather all their forces in Sendai to stage a strong counterattack.

"Our navy has already escaped Edo, and is headed north via ship."

Hijikata appeared amused by this.

"Ballsy plan he's got there."

He smiled.

"Might as well bet all our men on one big counterattack instead of waiting for them to get hacked to pieces, huh?"

Excitement glittered in Hijikata's eyes. Apparently he approved of Otori's plan.

Sanan glanced at Hijikata.

"Then I will go to Sendai first. We should establish a stronghold for when the main body of men arrives."

"Youâ€|?"

True, someone had to go first, at the very least to establish a base for the Shinsengumi.

We'd also likely need to pay our respects to the leaders of the Northern Alliance.

"It just seems a little dangerous to have our representative be from the Fury Corpsâ€|"

Sanan gave me a smile.

"I'm from Sendai, you know. I have some connections there. I think I would be the best choice for our advance guard, so to speak."

When he continued, it was in a voice barely above a whisper.

"There'sâ€|something else that's been bothering me as well."

"...Bothering you?"

He nodded and smiled, but it seemed that was all he'd tell me.

What could be bothering himâ€|?

"But...Sanan," started Heisuke, who also appeared unsure about this plan. "You're supposed to be dead, aren't you? Seems like that could be an issue."

He was right. When Sanan drank the Water of Life and became a fury, the Shinsengumi had announced to the world that he was dead.

But Sanan only continued smiling.

"A minor detail, easily dealt with."

"â€|"

True, Sanan had something of a silver tongue. I had no doubt he could talk his way out of awkward questions about his death.

Shimada spoke next.

"Well, in that case, Sanan probably is the best choice."

He didn't seem entirely comfortable with it, but there was no denying the intelligence of Sanan's argument.

Hijikata, however seemed completely appalled by the idea.

"No, the Fury Corps isn't cut out for that. You still can't stand to be up during the day."

Hijikata himself was proof that wasn't entirely true, and his refusal therefore seemed somewhat half-hearted.

"It's difficult, certainly, but not impossible. I don't see any reason to just follow behind the rest of the army, and I'd be glad to push myself for this."

I didn't doubt Sanan's ability to do what he said, but I did question the validity of his motives.

Hijikata and Sanan stared at one another, silent.

Shimada, not wanting another fight to break out said, "There's, ah, more to his message."

He coughed awkwardly.

"Otori will be leading Denshu Company to Bonari Pass, in hopes of stopping the enemy advance. I believe he means to buy time so that our allies can head toward Sendai, butâ€|"

Heisuke seemed suddenly concerned.

"Isn't Bonari Pass the front line right now?"

His brows drew together.

"I understand what Otori's trying to do, but I don't think it's going to be that easy to buy time."

I shared Heisuke's concerns: could Otori's troops really hold back the far more powerful Imperial Army?

Hijikata sighed.

"If we want Otori to come back alive, we need to send some reinforcements with him to Bonari Pass."

He frowned.

Sanan scowled.

"I disagree. If we are to win at Sendai, we must arrive there at full strength, fresh, and ready for battle."

Heisuke suddenly turned on him.

"But if we don't send someone to reinforce him at the pass, we're just abandoning Aizu to the Imperial Army."

Hijikata said nothing.

The Shinsengumi owed much to the Aizu Domain, but if he was to be victorious in Sendai, then the Shinsengumi had to depart. All of it.

It was not an easy decision to make.

"I will remain with the Aizu."

"Whatâ€|?"

Until that moment, Saito had been silent. When he spoke, I almost jumped.

"When my life ends, I want to be able to look back on it and say that I was true to myself and fought for my beliefs. Without the patronage of the Aizu Domain, the Sinsengumi would never have become what it is. I could not abandon them now and keep my honor. I wish to stand with them until the end comes to claim us both."

For once, it seemed Saito's personal convictions were not entirely in line with the Shinsengumi's. He spoke with the same calm conviction as always; it was clear he would not be swayed.

"I will go to Bonari Pass. Hijikata, please take the rest of our men to Sendai."

"Saito, you-"

Hijikata had barely opened his mouth before Sanan cut him off.

"Then I'll go prepare to depart. The early bird get the worm, yes?"

Before giving Hijikata a chance to reply, he stood and left the room.

Heisuke didn't seem particularly happy about how things had turned out, but after a moment of furious thought he stood up as well.

"Well, I guess I'll head out with Sanan. I don't really want to let him out of my sight, you know."

He gave a sort of lopsided grin.

Hijikata nodded.

"Yeahâ€¦ That's probably smart."

His face was grim.

Still trying to digest that we were losing yet another of our friends I glanced at Heisuke with a sad smile.

"Be careful, Heisuke."

"Hey, it's me!"

He gave me a kind smile and wink, and then dashed out the door and after Sanan.

Hijikata then turned to Shimada.

"I need you to go tell Otori and the Aizu what we've decided."

"Understood, sir. I'll be off as soon as I can."

He bowed, and left.

Saito turned once again to face Hijikata. Whether or not he'd been waiting until the room emptied to do so, I wasn't sure.

"Hijikata, please survive."

His eyes were serious.

"In the Shinsengumi, you and Kondou have laid out the path of the true samurai."

Even when they were slandered and despised by the people of Kyoto, or when the shogunate had begun to capitulate to the Imperial Army, they had never bent, never compromised what they stood for.

"Our standard of truth is a banner for all true warriors. The Shinsengumi represents all samurai. We lead the way."

In every warrior's soul was honor, dedication, and loyalty; in the Shinsengumi those values were made flesh. There could be no retreat.

Saito and Hijikata looked at one another silently for a moment.

"As a man that made the Shinsengumi into what it has become, it must be your duty, Hijikata, to carry that standard."

Hijikata sighed and flashed a bitter smile at his friend.

"You make it sound so easy."

His smile widened.

"I'll promise you this, though: I'll stick around till either the Shinsengumi's dead, or I am."

Saito bowed.

"Thank you, Chief."

Then he turned to me.

"I leave Hijikata in your care."

So few words, but with such great emotion behind them

"Right. We'll be fine"

I nodded.

"After all"

I grinned.

"I don't think Hijikata could die even if someone killed him."

Saito's eyes widened in surprise.

"I've seen him on the verge of death lots of times, but he always pulls through. Don't worry about him. He'll fight with the Shinsengumi forever. So"

I set my jaw and looked Saito straight in the eye.

"Please don't die, Saito."

The battle at Bonari Pass was sure to be an intense one. Many men would lose their lives.

But there was a tremendous difference between going into battle prepared to die, and going into battle expecting to die.

Hijikata sighed and gave me an unusually kind smile.

"I won't die even if I get killed? That's quite a statement, kid."

He let out a quiet snort of laughter.

He then turned back to his dear friend.

"If you've got time to worry about me, maybe you oughta be worrying about yourself too, Saito."

He said it as a joke, but there was no mistaking the underlying sincerity.

Saito looked at us both for a moment, then his face wrinkled in a soft smile.

"I won't die easily either. After all, I will be fighting in the name of the Shinsengumi."

He turned his eyes to me.

Thank you for your kind gesture."

I accompanied Hijikata to Sendai.

Concerned about Saito, Hijikata left Shimada with him in Aizu. Perhaps the two of them would be able to overcome the dangers that Saito would have been unable to alone.

Leaving Saito and Shimada turned out to be much more difficult than I had imagined. I spent so much time with themâ€¦

All I could do was pray that they would survive, and that we would meet again some day.

As September began, the cold autumn wind blew down on the main body of the Shinsengumi as they arrived in Sendai.

The trip had been easy enough, but upon our arrival we encountered a new problem: Sanan and the Fury Corps were nowhere to be found.

Heisuke, too, was incommunicado.

From the villagers in Sendai, we heard disturbing rumors that murder had been on the rise in recent days.

We scarcely wanted to think about it, butâ€¦it hardly seemed like it could be coincidence.

Upon reaching Sendai Castle, we were greeted by a man in western garb. As soon as he laid eyes on Hijikata his face split in a grin.

"Long time no see, Hijikata."

Hijikata nodded and gave the man a friendly smile.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Enomoto."

The man was Takeaki Enomoto.

He had been the shogunate navy's second in command.

When Edo had surrendered to the Imperial Army without a fight, he had taken his flagship Kaiyomaru, captured eight more battleships, and left.

He'd taken his new fleet to Sendai and arrived before we had.

A saddened look washed over his features.

"Have you already heard about Kondou?"

Hijikata only nodded.

"I apologize for having been unable to help. Our country has lost a truly great man."

Even I could tell the Enomoto's grief was real. It was a small moment, perhaps, but it was easy to see from it that Enomoto was a good man.

Hijikata sighed and then graced the man with another kind smile.

"He would've been happy to hear you say that."

He then gave a short, melancholy laugh, but his eyes were peaceful.

"But he wouldn't want us to stand around crying about him. He'd want us to get to work. Can you give me a rundown of the situation in Sendai?"

Enomoto gave him a bitter smile.

"You're right, Hijikata. Unfortunately, the news isn't very good."

I felt a knot form in the pit of my stomach.

"To begin with, there's something wrong at Sendai Castle. I'm not sure what they're thinkingâ€¦ I've requested an audience, but haven't received a response."

To ignore an official request was an odd response for someone like Enomoto to receive from a domain.

"There's a suspicious group of men running around Sendai. â€¦Well, there are rumors, at least."

I blinked, suddenly worried.

"Suspiciousâ€¦? How?"

"Well, there have been more murders here lately. And the rumors say some of the murderers ran back here to the castleâ€¦"

"â€¦"

Suspicious men running amok in Sendai, possibly murdering civiliansâ€¦ Sanan and the Fury Corps unreachableâ€¦

It wasn't difficult to put two and two together. Hijikata and I looked at one another. There was no doubt that we were thinking the same thing.

"Whatever the case, if this continues, we won't be able to take action. Perhaps if we could arrest these murderers, and restore peace in this areaâ€¦"

Hijikata's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Enomotoâ€¦ Think maybe you could leave the murders to me?"

Enomoto opened his mouth to protest, but something in Hijikata's gaze

made him change his mind, and he closed his mouth again thoughtfully.

"All right. I'll leave this one to you. No more questions from me."

"Umâ€|"

I spoke up just as Enomoto turned to go. There was something I had to askâ€|

"Have you heard anything about Okitaâ€|?"

Enomoto had been in Edo long after we'd left. Perhapsâ€|

â€|But he shook his head.

"Okitaâ€| One of the incredible Shinsengumi captains, right? No, unfortunately I haven't heard anything."

My shoulders slumped as I lowered my gaze to the ground.

"Ohâ€|"

However, I quickly looked back up.

"Well, thank you anywayâ€|"

He smiled and shook his head.

"No, my apologies that I didn't have better news for you."

I bowed politely, and he smiled and walked away.

"â€|"

Enomoto was a kind, candid man. I had a feeling he was well-liked by his men, and he seemed to get along well with Hijikata.

I confess I felt rather relieved.

â€|But not entirely, however. The dark cloud above our heads had merely lightened, not lifted.

I glanced at Hijikata and spoke in a quiet voice.

"â€|Do you think Sanan is the one killing people?"

His face was drawn.

"Can't say. You heard the same things I did. No way to know for sure, butâ€| If he isâ€| I'll have to kill him."

"Hijikataâ€|"

His mouth tightened into a line.

"He got pretty freaked out when he heard where a fury's power comes from. Might be he's pretty depressed right now. Maybe crazy."

I frowned.

"Trueâ€¦"

It certainly seemed likely that Sanan was responsible for the murders, but I hoped with all my heart that he wasn't.

If the truth turned out to be different, then I didn't doubt Hijikata would kill him without hesitation, whether he wanted to or not.

His expression softened.

"Strange things are afoot in Sendai, Chizuru. We can't be careless. I'd like to know what Heisuke's up to, but our priority is figuring out what's behind these murders. Got it?"

I nodded.

There were plenty of questions I wanted to ask him, but he had other things on his mind. It wasn't the time.

The following day, Hijikata began his investigation.

I tried to convince him that his body needed rest, not the stress of a murder investigation; I might as well have tried to lift a horse.

That was how I found myself lounging around our rooms while Hijikata went off on round with the rest of the soldiers.

I was so engaged when an unexpected visitor arrived.

"Heisuke?!"

Perhaps it was only from being up and about during the day, but he looked especially pale.

"Where's Hijikata?!"

"He's off doing rounds at the castleâ€¦"

Heisuke was clearly upset about somethin, but he paused for a moment to rein himself back in.

He frowned.

"Ahâ€¦ Well, can you give him a message for me?"

I nodded.

"Hijikata's been very worried about you guys. We couldn't get a hold of youâ€¦"

He sighed and closed his eyes.

"â€¦I figured as muchâ€¦"

He shook his head in apology and frustration, but he was still

clearly Heisuke.

There was no way he was out murdering people.

"Can you tell me what's going on?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Yeah. I can tell you everything that's happened since we got to Sendai. Just make sure you pass it on to Hijikata."

"All right."

He took a calming breath and then began.

"Sendai Castle isn't being cooperative. Chances are they're being pressured somehow by the Imperial Army. At least, that's my guess. So we looked around a little more, and while we were doing that we found out that Kodo's actually in Sendai."

"What?!"

My father had been forced to do research on the furies by the rebels before war broke out, or at least that's what we'd thought.

But now he was here, in Sendai?

Heisuke frowned, seeming suddenly nervous.

"Yeah. And Kodo seems to be leading a unit of furies in the Imperial Army."

He'd grown suddenly awkward, possibly because he realized this news wasn't exactly pleasant for me.

"Well, we figured we couldn't just let that slide, so we started watching their furies, seeing where they were going and stuff."

"And?"

"Well, I saw Sanan meet with Kodo."

"What?"

Heisuke explained that Sanan had told him they'd be more likely to get spotted if they moved together and had gone off on his own.

Some time after they'd split up, Heisuke had seen Sanan meeting with my father.

"I don't know what Sanan's up to."

It was certainly possible that Sanan could learn what was really going on by speaking with my father, but

If there was an entire unit of furies under my father's command, then meeting with him under false pretenses seemed awfully dangerous.

Like charging into an enemy line aloneâ€|

"You mean you'd like him to talk to you if he's going to go do something dangerous?"

Heisuke frowned.

"No, see, it wasn't just once or twice. He's been meeting with Kodo a lot, and if I bring it up, he just dodges the question. He doesn't act like he's got any plans to contact the rest of the Shinsengumi. I just didn't know what to doâ€| I heard Hijikata was in Sendai, so I snuck away and came here."

It was the middle of the day, which meant Sanan was probably still sleeping. Heisuke was clearly suffering from being out with the sun, but the opportunity had been too good to miss.

"That must have been hard on youâ€|"

I'd just let my eyes fall to the floor, not sure what else to say, when several strange men suddenly leapt into the room.

"What?!"

Without even bothering to speak, they lunged at Heisuke, swords already out and shining.

"He dodged the attack easily, drawing his own sword as he moved.

With a snarl, Heisuke struck out at one of the men before he had a chance to recover.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

The man staggered back, blood pouring from his arm.

But even as I watched, the wound closed and the blood stopped.

"Furies?!"

Heisuke's eyes shot to me.

"Run, Chizuru!"

But then, just as I turned-

"Hold onâ€| There's no need for that."

"Whatâ€|?"

The voice wasâ€|familiar. Very familiar.

I slowly turned toward it.

My eyes shot wide open.

"Fatherâ€¦|?!"

The men who'd attacked Heisuke didn't seem to see this as a sign that they should stop, and they continued to advance on Heisuke, swords glittering.

Although he was clearly their superior in regard to swordsmanship, he was outnumbered and the daylight had weakened him: he moved more slowly and his strikes weren't as sure.

The men my father had brought, however, showed no indication of being similarly affected.

My father gave them a proud smile.

"Aren't they wonderful? Furies no longer restrained by the cycles of day and night."

If what he said was true, they had indeed been improved, but I could hardly say that I saw them as "wonderful".

I turned on him with angry eyes.

"Father, please! Stop them!"

His eyes widened as if he's only just remembered and he looked over to Heisuke with a smile.

"Ah yes, I don't know how to thank you. Without you, it would have taken me much longer to find my daughter."

Heisuke glared at him.

"You followed me!"

He spat out through gritted teeth.

My father ignored him and turned back to me. His voice was soft.

"I've come to get you. At last, we'll be able to restore our clan."

"Clanâ€¦|? You mean the Yukimura?"

He smiled and nodded.

"With these superior furies, restoring the glory of our clan with be child's play."

He was talking nonsense.

â€¦|Or perhaps I simply didn't want to understand.

"You're planning to use furies to restore the Yukimura lineage to power?"

"Yes I am. I've done all of this for you."

I stood stunned for a moment, then shook my head.

I can't go with you, Father. I don't want glory if it comes from violence."

I gave him a shaky smile hoping that it might help him accept my refusal.

Instead, he walked closer.

I tried to back away, but there were furies blocking my way.

A pained look flashed in his eyes.

"You've been with the Shinsengumi for too long. They've corrupted you."

"What? No!"

I hadn't changed! He had.

Heisuke's sudden cry broke into my thoughts.

"Goddammit! Get off me, you bastards!"

He'd managed to keep the furies at bay with his sword, but we were both completely surrounded.

"Father!"

"If we just sit down and talk this through, I'm sure you'd understand."

"I-!"

Then he drove his fist into my stomach.

Stars leapt up before my eyes, the world went dim, and I slipped into unconsciousness.

When I awoke, I was in a room I didn't recognize.

"Where? Where am I?"

My words had been more for myself than anything, as I didn't expect an answer, but to my surprise a familiar voice spoke from behind me.

"You're in Sendai Castle."

I turned around, my eyes widening.

"Sanan?"

And next to him was my father.

"What's going on?"

Not particularly specific, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I met with Kodo secretly here in Sendai, and we've agreed to work together in order to do research on the furies."

"Then you're working with the Imperial Army now?"

Sanan gave a strained smile.

"Is that what you think? Interesting. Well, perhaps that is true."

His smile became teasing.

" "

My father looked at me, concerned.

"How are you feeling, Chizuru? I tried not to hit you too hard."

"Oh."

It was a sick parody of kindness, but there was something in his tone that reminded me of the father I remembered.

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

He had kidnapped me, true, but he hadn't tied me up or shackled me in any way. That was unexpected.

Perhaps.

Sanan seemed to know what I was thinking and glanced at the doorway.

"I wouldn't suggest attempting to escape. We could make that difficult."

"Okay."

So long as Sanan and my father were in the room, then escape was hopeless.

"In any event. It was reckless of you to bring her here, Kodo."

Sanan's face was bitter as he looked at my father.

"Hijikata is no fool. He may well be on to our plan."

My father's brow furrowed.

"You were the one who told me that if I wanted to know where my daughter was, all I had to do was follow Toudou to the Shinsengumi."

Sanan sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, I did, but I never suggested we ought to kidnap her."

He opened his eyes again and his expression softened.

"Well, what's done is done. No point arguing about it. We need to be thinking about what this could mean, and plan for it."

My father smiled and relaxed.

"You needn't worry about the future."

His eyes were narrow, and his voice confident.

"I'm sure the furies I left to deal with young Toudou will return to the castle soon."

I just about choked on my gasp.

"What?! What did they do to Heisuke?!"

But I already knew the answer.

If he let Heisuke go, the first thing he would do would be to tell Hijikata everything, and then the jig would be up.

"I doubt he survived. After all, I did bring quite a few of them."

Heisuke was an excellent swordsman and a fury, but

The furies my father had brought didn't seem to have any trouble in sunlight

Heisuke, on the other hand, had looked pale and weakened.

"

I felt my heart clench with worry, then suddenly-

"Really? C'mon, why you gotta just assume I'm dead? Hurts my feelings"

I cried out with joy.

"Heisuke?!"

And behind him

"Chizuru, you alright?"

He spared me a quick, concerned glance, then his eyes flicked back to Sanan and Kodo.

"I'm fine!"

I nodded vigorously, and Hijikata let out a short snort of laughter.

My father stared, seeming to lose his nerve.

"What?! But my furies are better! How could you have destroyed

them all?!"

Hijikata gave him a wry smile.

"Better? If you say so, old man, but if you wanna take out the Shinsengumi you'll need about ten times what you sent."

My father seemed now at a loss for words.

Sanan, however, seemed completely unruffled by their appearance.

"Ah— I figured you'd show up here soon— You didn't bring any of the men, though— Well, I suspected you wouldn't. Still, doesn't it seem rather reckless for the two of you to just charge headlong into unknown enemy territory?"

Hijikata leveled his cold, piercing glare at Sanan and when he spoke his voice was as frigid as frozen steel.

"Explain. Why didn't you contact us?"

Sanan's face fell just a little bit.

"There's nothing for you in Sendai. The Northern Alliance plans to leave the war."

I blinked.

"What—?"

The Sendai Domain, the leader of the alliance, was trying to avoid the war.

It hit almost like a physical blow.

Sanan continued.

"They heard about all the losses in Aizu— Perhaps they got scared."

At that point, my father seemed to decide that there was little point to keeping anything more hidden.

"I was given orders by the Imperial Army to come to Sendai. They told me to take the castle with my forces, and completely annihilate the Northern Alliance. But that's not what I wanted to do. I can't agree with their ideology or politics, and at any rate the Sendai were already preparing to flee. A little pressure, and I was able to keep them from doing anything."

Sanan nodded as if to confirm what my father said. He then turned back to Hijikata.

"We found common ground in our distaste for the Imperial Army, and decided to seize Sendai ourselves. In return for not attacking the castle directly, Kodo was given tacit consent to remain by the domain. That allowed us to increase our forces in number."

I frowned and stared pleadingly at my father.

"Does this mean you're on the side of the former shogunate's army?"

He gave me a warm smile.

"I'm on your side, Chizuru. I have no intention of taking part in mankind's disputes. Let us bring retribution to the humans who destroyed our clan. We will forge a new kingdom with our own hands."

"Fatherâ€|"

So he meant to declare war against all of mankind then? Noâ€|not even for my father would I do such a thing.

But before I could answer, a whole crowd of men poured into the room.

"Ah, they seem to have noticed the intruders."

There was still a smile playing about Sanan's face.

"Not only does this castle hold the furies of the Imperial Army, but also the Shinsengumi's Fury Corps."

Then we would have to contend not only with our own furies, but also with my father's much more dangerous improved ones.

"All of the furies that exist in this country are gathered in this castle. They are a force powerful enough to overcome even the newest western firearms of the Imperial Army."

That they were powerful, I had no doubt.

But in their eyes I saw only madness; the mindless hunger and lust for blood of an animal starved too long.

There was no humanity there.

My father smiled proudly at me.

"Please give us your help, Chizuru. We need you to lead us. You must command these furies and restore your demon clan."

"Fatherâ€|"

Iâ€|

I didn't care about restoring the Yukimura clan.

I didn't want to create more furies so that blood could drive them mad.

I didn't want to see any more people suffer.

"Fatherâ€| You're wrong."

His eyes went wide.

But I pushed on.

"Building a kingdom on the corpses of others isn't right! Human or demon, every life is precious!"

His mouth gave in shock.

Sanan turned to Hijikata.

"I believe Kodo was saying that he'd be willing to assist the Shinsengumi. So what do you think, Hijikata? Would you like to lead this army of furies against the Imperial Army?"

Hijikata's reply was immediate and certain.

"You know the answer."

Hijikata had been opposed to the furies from the beginning, and had never approved of Sanan's research into them after my father's disappearance.

I doubted he'd changed his mind about them.

Sanan sighed.

"Very wellâ€¦"

He drew his sword slowly from its scabbard.

"Sanan?!"

Did he mean to attack his own friend?!

I stiffened, but Hijikata didn't move toward his own blade. He remained still, coolly contemplating Sanan.

Almost as if someone had dumped paint on it, Sanan's hair slowly changed to white.

He raised his sword-

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

A single cut and the fury was dead.

"All a fury exists for is battle, and now we've taken that away from themâ€¦"

Sanan's mouth twisted into a sad smile as he looked down at the man he'd just killed.

"The least I can do for them is let them die here, in battle."

The room fell silent.

Then it exploded in noise-the enraged battle cries of the furies; the click and rattle of swords being drawn.

"Heisuke-"

"I know!"

Heisuke dropped into a fighting stance and slipped his hand around the hilt of his sword. His hair turned white.

"Sanan, this is way too badass for an old guy like you! Why didn't you tell us?!"

"Well, as they say, to fool your enemies you must first fool your friends."

Their faces split into grins as their swords whistled and sparked, fury after fury falling before them.

"Besides, doesn't the hero's right-hand man make the best villain?"

Hijikata responded with a bark of wry laughter, and drew his own sword in a flash of silver light as his hair turned white as well.

"Still means the hero gets stuck cleaning up the damn mess."

As their three swords spun and hissed through the air, blood gushed and splattered, painting the walls of Sendai Castle a deep red.

They looked like three gods of death, drowning their foes in a sea of blood.

"â€|"

I noticed that my mouth had gone dry, and my hands had begun to shake.

"Thenâ€|everything you told me was a lieâ€|?"

My father seemedâ€|deflated.

"You said you wanted to do more research on the furies in the kingdom of demonsâ€| Why, Sanan?"

Sanan looked over at him sword in hand, spattered with blood.

"I saw the endâ€|"

He gave a sad chuckle.

"I was trying to discover a way for furies to live past theirâ€|limits. Learning who short our lifespan has made me impatient. If I wanted to continue my research, then I would have to dirty my handsâ€|"

He frowned, disappointed in himself.

Every suspicious thing he had done had been in service of a single goal: saving his fellow furies.

"The furies have no future. You know that as well as I, Kodo."

It was the truth, but it hit like a physical blow.

"No matter how resistant you make them to sunlight, they will push themselves too hard, and their lifespans will shrink and the bloodlust will drive them mad."

My father simply stood there, dumbstruck.

Sanan had confirmed the truth we'd all suspected: there was no way to save the furies.

"We are a mistake; a failed experiment. Furies are not something that should exist on this Earth. Let's end this."

"â€|"

Sanan's true intentions had left me surprised and shocked, as had his admission that the furies were a failure.

Was he right? Could they never be saved? Had all hope been lost?

I let my mind drift for just a moment, and then saw a shadow move out of the corner of my eye-

"Ah-!"

"Graaaaaah!"

Suddenly there was a fury only feet from me, his eyes red and mad with bloodlust.

I reached for my sword-

I was a little too late.

Before my hand had even touched the hilt of my sword, I saw the fury's blade sweeping down toward me-

"Huh?"

There was blood, but it wasn't mine.

No cuts on my bodyâ€|

Someone had protected me-

"Father?!"

I reached for him as he fell.

The fury pulled back for another swing, one that would likely be the end of both of us-

Then it froze, gurgled oddly, and slid neatly in half, a blade glistening in the center.

The owner of that blade, his face twisted by an emotion I couldn't place, snarled at the corpse as it fell.

"Turn your back on us in a fight, will you? Idiot!"

Hijikata's eyes shifted up, to my father's wound, and I saw his face twitch. Immediately, he moved closer and turned his back to us, sword held at the ready.

My father's weak voice brought my attention back to him.

"Chizuruâ€¦ Are youâ€¦ all right?"

It was an effort for him to speak.

The wound he'd taken was undoubtedly a fatal one.

I wanted to scream, but I tried to force a smile to my face.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. I'm not hurt at all."

Despite my best efforts, my voice shook and cracked.

He looked so...peaceful.

"Our research wasâ€¦ a failure. Iâ€¦ I knew there was no future. For the furiesâ€¦"

"Fatherâ€¦"

"But I couldn'tâ€¦ give it up. I wanted to bring back your clanâ€¦ Your familyâ€¦"

Ever since I'd been young, my father had always tried to do what was best for me. Even now, in his own way, he was still tryingâ€¦

"Itâ€¦ it seems my fate is to die with the furies. I haveâ€¦ I have done something terribleâ€¦"

His voice was getting weaker.

"This isâ€¦ for the best. Please, Chizuruâ€¦ don'tâ€¦ cryâ€¦"

"â€¦"

I said nothing; I only nodded.

Were I to open my mouth and speak, then the tears would never stop.

He gave me one last smile, sighed, and was gone.

"â€¦"

After what seemed like an eternity, I looked up.

The battle was over. Except for Heisuke, Sanan, and Hijikata, not a single fury was left alive.

Sanan gave a pained smile.

"Kind of a waste, isn't it? That many furies could have been awfully usefulâ€¦"

I blinked. Had he just made a joke?

Sanan frowned and faced Hijikata.

"The Shinsengumi's lost a lot of it's fighting strength. Do you think we can win the next battle?"

His mouth tightened in concern, but Hijikata replied with a smile.

"You don't win battles by thinking you'll lose them."

Heisuke gave him a smug smile.

"Well, you don't win just by thinking you'll win either."

He then snorted with laughter, then coughed to cover it up.

It was true: The Shinsengumi had lost a lot of furies, but their unity had grown stronger. That was something, at least.

â€|Or so I wanted to think.

"G-Gaagh!"

A sudden burst of pain wiped the grin from Heisuke's face. Sanan, too, had doubled over in agony. Was it the bloodlust?!

Sanan glanced up with a grim frown.

"Looks like we'veâ€|reached our limit."

His voice was oddly calm; almost distant.

"Limitâ€|?"

I gasped.

Had theyâ€|had they used up the last of their life?

Heisuke saw my eyes go wide, and gave me an awkward sort of laugh.

"Well, we were some of the first furies."

He was rightâ€| They'd been in more battles as furies than anyone else, and all of the strength and healing they'd enjoyed had eaten away at their futures until there was nothing left.

Hijikata looked down, his jaw set.

"Did you knowâ€|?"

Sanan smiled.

"What warrior doesn't know his own body?"

His legs suddenly shook violently, and he crumpled to the floor.

Hijikata dropped to his knees and took both of their hands in his own.

Sanan looked up at him with a sad smile.

"I know we haveâ€|not always seen eye to eye, but I have always been proud to be a member of the Shinsengumi."

His voice was growing quiet.

Hijikata gave a strained smile of his own.

"You think I didn't figure that out? Any idiot could see you'd do anything for the Shinsengumi."

He was doing his best to act tough, so that Heisuke and Sanan wouldn't worry, but it wasn't easy for him.

"Looks like we're in the lead this time," said Heisuke. "Don't be in too much of a hurry to catch up though, all right?"

Heisuke grinned and tried to keep his tone light, although his voice was starting to fade too. Hijikata gave him a short nod.

"I'm having a hard time buying that 'yes'. You're a little too short-tempered to keep a promise like thatâ€|"

Hijikata smiled grimly.

"Shut it, you little brat. You really think I'm gonna take that kind of crap from you?"

Heisuke's face relaxed as Hijikata snarled back at him.

â€|He'd done that on purpose.

Sanan glanced back at his chief and long time friend.

"You must go north."

He could barely speak now.

"Kodo said that he used water from the northeast when he was refining the Water of Life."

Thenâ€|perhaps there was still hope! Perhaps something from the north could repair the damage done to the bodies of the furies.

Heisuke frowned.

"Hijikataâ€| Don'tâ€|don't lose sight of what's important, all right? Being reckless doesn't work out so wellâ€|"

His voice had grown rough and raspy.

I saw Hijikata's knuckles whiten as he tightened his gripâ€|

But with a sound like sand pouring over a stone, their hands crumbled into ash, and in moments they were no more.

"Hijikataâ€|"

He didn't answer.

He only stared, silent, at the twin piles of ash that sat where his friends had been only moments before.

I felt somehow that he was crying.

There were no tears in his eyes, of course, but even soâ€|somehow he was crying.

I didn't know how long we sat there before he stood up.

"Let's go."

"Okayâ€|"

His voice was curt and clipped, but when he turned to look at me his eyes went suddenly wide and he turned away, uncomfortable.

"Hey, no crying."

I nodded, and tried to stop, but it was no good.

No matter how much I wiped at them, the tears wouldn't stop. In one day-in one hour!-I'd been forced to say goodbye to Heisuke, Sanan, and the father I hadn't seen for more than a yearâ€|

They following day Hijikata and Enomoto visited Sendai Castle once again.

Their intent was to discern the leanings of the Northern Alliance, specifically in regard to fighting the Imperial Army.

But it was just as Sanan had saidâ€|

News of the losses in Aizu had paralyzed the Sendai leadership with fear, and they were scrambling to make some sort of deal with the Imperial Army.

Enomoto argued that they should give up on the Sendai and move further north.

We also learned that Yoshinobu had already made a deal with the new government, and was currently under house arrest.

That wasn't enough for the new government, however. Satsuma, Choshu, and their allies were still working to take everthing that belonged to the shogun.

Enomoto had made it quite clear that he didn't care for how they were doing things. He argued for founding a new country for those who were being oppressed by the Imperial Army.

That was a decision that would have to be postponed, however, at least until the end of the battle at Bonari Pass. Once that was finished, Otori's men would arrive in Sendai.

After the army was whole again, they'd make their decision.

I heard talk that we might leave the mainland to regroup elsewhere, and asked Hijikata about it.

"Are you going to go to Ezo?"

Ezo was a large island north of Sendai, at least a day's boat ride across the sea.

"Maybe."

He shrugged.

"The Shinsengumi Works for the shogun and the shogunate. That hasn't changed."

"The Shinsengumi shows others the way, right?"

I nodded. Hijikata smiled.

"If the Shinsengumi is something fighting men can believe in, then I'm sure Kondou's happy."

The ideals that Kondou and Hijikata had fought so hard for had been taken to heart by many soldiers and samurai.

Had Kondou still been alive, I had no doubt he would have been pleased.

"Well, that's one more reason not to die, then."

It was a burden on him, undoubtedly, but Hijikata had seen many of his friends lay down their lives for the Shinsengumi and what it represented.

Knowing what it had meant to them, he couldn't allow himself to die.

"As long as men believe in what we stand for, I can't let the Shinsengumi die."

"That's right."

The doubt that I'd seen in him weeks before was gone. He had accepted his place at the head of the Shinsengumi.

Seeing him so at peace made me feel the same.

Hijikata smiled.

"I have to protect the Shinsengumi."

"Yes, you do."

He looked over at me, his gaze warm.

I felt good. Just being next to him was enough to make me feel like everything was right with the world.

A few days later, the men we'd left in Aizu finally reached Sendai.

Unfortunately, bad news came with them.

"Saito has fallen in battle."

Shimada struggled with his next words.

"His last words were 'Leave the rest to Hijikata'â€|"

His jaw was tight with emotion as he spoke. Hijikata had left him in Aizu to watch after Saito. He probably felt especially responsible for the other man's death.

"â€|"

I bit my lip until it almost bled, trying desperately to keep the tears from my eyes. It didn't seem fair to cry in front of him.

Hijikata gave his friend a pained smile.

"Sorry I put you through that, Shimada. I'm just glad you made it back alive."

He clapped the other man gently on the shoulder, but it was his words that made Shimada's eyes go wide.

"Th-Thank you! â€|Sir!"

Heisuke and Sanan had died in Sendai, and now Saito had died in Aizu.

Hijikata was the only fury left among the Shinsengumi.

"It's been hard already, but I'm pretty sure things are gonna get worse."

He looked down for a moment as he spoke.

"You've all fought enough."

Shimada set his jaw and looked back at Hijikata.

"I've already given my life to the Shinsengumi, it just hasn't taken it yet. We'll follow you to the end of the world, sir."

The rest of the men nodded and mumbled in agreement.

"We want to fight as the Shinsengumi. We want to fight for the justice we believe in."

Shimada's words brought to mind what Saito had said to me the last time I'd seen him.

The Shinsengumi was united in body and mind.

I felt a great happiness welling up in me and suddenly I couldn't hold it in any longer. Tears spilled forth.

Hijikata gave them a bitter smile.

"â€|Idiots."

He twisted his face into a sneer, but there was no hiding the warmth in his eyes as he looked out over the men.

Every one of them respected him.

They knew the coming battle would not be an easy one, but there was no doubt in their minds: their place was with Hijikata, and the Shinsengumi.

October came.

The Sendai Domain was moving closer and closer to submitting to the Imperial Army, and it was getting more and more dangerous for us to stay.

Even Otori agreed that we should leave.

Ultimately, it was decided that the Shinsengumi would head to Ezo with Enomoto's fleet.

We left Sendai and headed into the forest.

We'd almost arrived at the rendezvous when Hijikata suddenly stopped and turned to me.

"Chizuru, I want you to stay here."

"What?"

His words stopped me in my tracks.

"â€|There's gonna be a lot of fighting. You should get away from that. There's no reason for you to stick with us anymore, right?"

"No, there is!"

It came out somewhat louder than I'd intended.

There was no legitimate reason for me to accompany Hijikata and the Shinsengumi, true, butâ€|

I wanted to stay by his sideâ€|

"â€|Kazama'll probably be coming after me soon, but I can take him. You don't need to worry about that."

"No, that's not it!"

Once again I found myself nearly yelling.

"I don't want to stay just because I need you to protect me from Kazama!"

Hijikata sighed and looked away for a moment. When his eyes came back

to me, they were cold and quiet. Almost sad.

"I can't make you happy."

What?

My eyes went wide.

When I spoke, my voice shook.

"I don't need to be happy. All I want to do is to fight alongside the Shinsengumi. I want to follow the same path you do."

I didn't care what my position might be, so long as I could stay at Hijikata's side.

"Please. I'll do whatever you tell me to."

He gave me a twisted half-smile and crossed his arms.

Finally he sighed and shrugged, defeated.

"Well, I'm touched you feel that way, but I want you to be happy."

"Hijikata"

He wasn't just saying that to make me feel better; I could feel the sincerity behind his words.

I was happy to know he cared, but

"Here are your orders, from the Chief of the Shinsengumi."

He looked me in the eye, his voice flat and cold.

"You would impede the function of the Shinsengumi, and will therefore not accompany us to Ezo. You're a woman, and you deserve to have your own life. I can't let us tie you down anymore."

It wasn't a shove; it was barely a gentle tap, but I felt as if I'd been punched.

"No! This isn't what I want-!"

I cried out to him, my voice shaking, but his back was to me and he showed no sign that he heard.

"Hijikata!"

He walked away from me and didn't stop. He didn't even turn to look back at me

"Hijikata"

I stood there, stunned. It felt as if the very ground I stood on had begun to crumble beneath me. Despair filled my heart until I thought it would shatter, and tears began to pour from my eyes.

"Umâ€|Yukimuraâ€|"

I heard a quiet voice behind me, and turned to see who it was.

"Otoriâ€|"

"I heard everything."

Otori and his men were marching with us to meet Enomoto's fleet.

I'd heard that he'd been in some of the fiercest battles in Aizu, and they'd changed him. He seemed stronger now, like a samurai.

"I apologize for eavesdropping, but there didn't seem to be a good moment to admit I was here."

He coughed awkwardly, then handed me a small, white piece of cloth.

"What's thisâ€|?"

"It's called a, ah, handkerchief. They use them in the west. I thought you could use it to dry your tearsâ€|"

"â€|"

I hesitated for a moment, but it was embarrassing to stand in from of him covered in tears, so I took it.

He waited until I had calmed down some before he began to speak again.

"You want to stay with Hijikata, I take it?"

I nodded.

"Thenâ€|will you wait for us? Until we've settled down in Ezo."

"Whatâ€|?"

"Once we're settled in, I can send for you. I mean, I can hardly leave a crying girl here alone!"

He smiled.

"Otoriâ€|"

"Oh, you needn't thank me."

He dismissed my protest with a good-natured wave of his hand.

"Once you get to Ezo, I'll assign you to Hijikata. It won't be easy work, but at least you'll be with him."

* * *

><p>(OMG! *starts to sob quietly* TTnTT)

19. Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9

January 1869

I got my summons from Otori right after the Matsumae Domain fell.

>The Matsumae Domain had, until then, governed the island of Ezo.
If Hijikata and the rest of the loyalist forces were to operate in Ezo, then Matsumae was, by necessity, their first target.

>I crossed to the island just as Otori had instructed, booking passage on a Russian merchant ship.
I arrived to find the land of Ezo covered in snow.

"Hello there, Yukimura."

>When I arrived at Hakodate, it was Otori who came to pick me up.
"Thank you so much for arranging all of this."

>I gave him a short bow.
"Andâ€¦ Congratulations on establishing the Republic of Ezo."

>After conquering Matsumae, they'd wasted no time in establishing the country that had been proposed back in Sendai.
"Well, calling it a republic is a bit of an exaggeration."

>He smiled.
"As soon as the elections were finished, I sent for you."

>"Elections?"
As quickly and simply as he could, Otori explained the concept of an election, and how it gave everyone a voice in the government.

>"Thenâ€¦ everyone has a say about who's in power."
I'd never heard of such a thing before, but it seemed like a good idea.

>"Enomoto is our president at the moment. He's the only one who can call the whole government together."
Otori had taken the post of Minister of the Army, and Hijikata was Vice-Minister of the same.

>"â€¦ You had to wait for three months, I understand. Were they long?"
"â€¦ Yes."

>I nodded.
Still, the fact that they'd already defeated the Matsumae Domain and established their own government spoke well for the excellence of the one-time shogun's former military.

>Three months had been a long time for me, but to the world of war and politics, it was scarcely the blink of an eye.
Otori and I chatted as we walked, but when the subject of Hijikata came up, his expression clouded.

>"Ever since we came to Ezo, Hijikata's beenâ€¦ different."
"Different? How?"

>"He's nicer to his men, which is good, but he spends too much time locked away in his room. He says he spends most of his time there deep in thought, and he won't let anyone come by."<p>

I wasn't quite sure what to say.

>Otori seemed to sense it and, instead of continuing the conversation, reached into his pocket to remove an envelope.
"I think he needs you."

>"Meâ€¦?"
My heart skipped a beat.

>"This document officially appoints you to your position. You can get the details after you give it to Hijikata."
"â€¦ Thank you."

>I took the letter from him and bowed.<p>

The year was coming to an end.

>I changed into the western clothes I'd brought-it was going to take time to get used to them-and headed for Goryokaku.
The main hall was full of people, all of them there to celebrate the establishment of their new government.

>But Hijikata wasn't among them. He was in his room, alone.<p>

I took a deep breath, then rapped my hand against the door several times in quick succession. Otori had called it "knocking," and told me that it was customary to do it when opening a western-style door, too signal whoever was inside.

After a few seconds of silence, a tired voice drifted out.

>"â€|I'm not attending. This isn't the time for a party."
I knew that voice very well.

>I put my hand on the doorknob and turned.
"Excuse me."

>He turned toward the door, preparing a half-hearted tirade for whoever had intruded on his solitude.
When he saw me, the words froze in his throat.

>"Chizuru Yukimura reporting as ordered. I have been assigned to serve as Vice Minister Hijikata's page, by Minister Otori."
His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, finally closing with a snap. He stared at me intently for several more seconds, then frowned.

>"It's a mistake. I haven't been told about this."
I handed him the letter Otori had given me.

>"I was given these orders from Minister Otori earlier."
He snatched the envelope from me with a scowl and tore it open. His eyes scanned the page rapidly, his frown deepening with each line.

>When he finished, he shot me a sharp look and thrust the letter and its envelope back into my hands.
"No. Take it back. I can't approve this posting."

>"â€|I understand."
I nodded and took the letter from his outstretched hand.

>Then I tore it to pieces.
"What are you doingâ€|?"

>He looked shocked.
"I don't care if you don't approve of these orders. I shouldn't have relied on them in the first place."

>I'd tried to force Hijikata to let me stay with Otori's orders. Now I saw how wrong that had been.
I hadn't come to Ezo because I was ordered to.

>I'd accepted Otori's help and come to Ezo because I wanted to be with Hijikata. That was all that mattered.
"I came here because I wanted to. I want you to let me stay. Here. With you."

>I couldn't let orders be the reason: He had to make that choice.
Hijikata frowned and looked away.

>"Not fair for me to be the only guy with the luxury of a girl for a page. Especially when I'm sending men off to die."
"Isâ€|is that why you left me?"

>He fell silent and shifted, uncomfortable.
Then that was whyâ€|

>"Stop this!"
Before I realized it, I was yelling. Hijikata looked equally surprised.

>"You always do this! You decide you can't do somethin, and then you make up all the excuses you need to justify it! You say you're doing it for my feeling, but you don't even know what they are!"
When he'd left me behind, Hijikata had said that he couldn't make me happy, and that I should go live my life.

>But he was what made me happy, and I wanted to live my life with him.
Now he was trying to push me away again, so that he could bear his burden alone.

>I couldn't let him do that.
"You take on so much, and you won't let anyone else help!"

>"That's my job."
There was an edge of anger to his voice.

>"If I can handle it, then it's my responsibility to!"
I screamed back at him at the top of my lungs.

>"What about the people who have to watch you do this?!"
I'd watched him torture himself this way for too long: every hardship, every burden, was his and his alone to suffer in solitude.

>And I hadn't been the only one. Inoue, Yamazaki, Kondouâ€¦ They'd all had to watch, and so had plenty of other people who cared about him.
"I can't let you do this to yourself! I want to be here for you! I want to help you! What else am I supposed to do?!"

>Hijikata suddenly became blurry, and I realized that there were tears filling my eyes.
He fell silent.

>Then, after several moments of silence, he sighed and slumped.
"â€¦I give up."

>I blinked.
"â€¦Can't fight an Edo woman. Better to just listen to 'em, I guess."

>His voice was gentle, and he looked up with a wry smile.
Then suddenly, his arms were around me.

>I let myself sink into his chest, speechless.
He held me tight, as if now that he finally had me, he didn't ever want to let go.

>"Ever since you leftâ€¦"
He stopped, and I could sense him trying to organize his feelings. I got the impression he wasâ€¦confused.

>"I've figured so things out."
His arms tightened. Whatever distance had separated us in the past was long gone now.

>"Youâ€¦supported me. Guess that's the best way to put it."
He sounded slightly bewildered, as if even he couldn't believe what he was saying.

>He wasn't the only one.
"â€¦When you're notâ€¦here, it's hard for me toâ€¦to deal with it. All of it. Life, I guess."

>My heart swelled with each word he spoke.
"You saved me."

>I could feel the warmth of his body touching every part of mine. I couldn't stop crying.
"â€¦Chizuruâ€¦ Do you think the Shinsengumi still stands for what it means to be a true samurai? Have I done what I was supposed to? Have I led us down the right path?"

>I nodded.
"The soul of the Shinsengumi that our friends believed in is alive in you."

>Then after a moment of thought, I continued.
"In face, I think it's even stronger now. We've been through a lot but it's brought all of us together."

>"Hearing you say that makes me happy."
His voice was warm.

>"The men the Shinsengumi has left are true samurai. No more need for the iron fist."
"â€¦Yes."

>Everyone in the Shinsengumi had the same goal in sight now.
With that unity of vision came a clarity of purpose, and I hoped that without the necessity for discipline and management, Hijikata's burden might ease a little.

>"Well, from now on, please don't try and hide your problems from me. I'm here to help you. You don't have to do this alone anymore."
He was silent then, but his arms stayed wrapped around me.

>Then at last he spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.
"â€¦Stay with me."

>As Vice-Minister Hijikata's page, I spent every day assisting him in his duties.
Since coming to Ezo, he'd seemed much more at ease during the daylight hours. Perhaps there was something about the

northern climate that was affecting his fury blood.

>My job saw me spending more time around Hijikata than I ever had before, and he began treating me quite nicely.
I felt a little bad that I was getting spoiled, but whenever I was around him my heart soared and my breath came a little faster.

>Then one day just after the beginning of the new year, Otori came to visit Hijikata.
"Please, have some tea."

>"Oh, thank you."
He gave me a warm smile as I handed him his tea.

>"Your assistant here is quite something. Tell me, where did you find her?"
Hijikata narrowed his eyes.

>"â€|Well, I think some samurai wannabe had her sent over here without my permission. You know anything about that?"
He glared at Otori, who only laughed.

>"Oh, I was only doing it for your sake, you know. â€|Although, I'm a bit jealous now."
He glanced at me before continuing.

>"A cute, dedicated efficient pageâ€| What man could ask for anything more?"
I blushed.

>"No, I'mâ€|umâ€|"
My cheeks felt like they were burning up. I tried to busy myself with the tea, and avoided anyone's eyes.

>Hijikata glanced at me for a moment, then back at Otori, his face calm and serene.
"â€|I agree. So long as she sticks with me, I don't think I'll need anybody else."

>I nearly dropped the tea.
Otori also looked rather surprised, but quickly raised his cup to his lips in an attempt to hide it.

>I felt as if I should say something, butâ€|<p>

When I opened my mouth, nothing came out.

>Hijikata, of course, remained entirely unruffled, and sipped at his tea as if he'd done nothing more exciting than comment on the weather while Otori and I recovered.
Otori finished a very, very long sip, coughed awkwardly, and spoke.

>"I, ah, didn't think I'd hear something like that from you, Hijikata. â€|I'd want a wife like her too."
Hijikata laughed.

>"Well, she's mine. You'll have to find one of your own, because there's no way I'm letting her go."
Otori laughed.

My face was growing hotter by the moment.

>By now my ears were probably the same shade of brilliant scarlet as my cheeks.
Otori looked at Hijikata and me, and laughed again.

>"Well, with Hijikata in this sort of, ah, mood, I suppose I shouldn't stay too long, hm?"
With a one last grin at me, he turned to Hijikata. When he spoke, his voice was grim.

>"Do you think they'll be coming?"
"They"â€|?

>Who were they talking about?
Hijikata showed no sign of being surprised, but I saw the good cheer of a moment before fade from his face as well.

>"Yeah. Soon as the snow melts."
Otori nodded.

>"Well, if you think so too, I'm convinced. I've been thinking the same thing myself. Enomoto wants to try and work things out diplomatically, but I don't think we'll get out of this without at least some fighting."
"â€|Yeah. There'll be a fight, that's for sure. No way the Imperial Army's gonna just forget about us."

>"Ohâ€|"
At last, I understood.

>"Enomoto can hope for peace if that's what he wants to do, but the army should be ready to move as soon as spring's here."
"Of

course. Don't worry about Enomoto and his cabinet. I'll deal with them."

>Hijikata nodded.
"Huh. Gotta admit, before we came here, I never thought you and me would ever see eye to eye."

>Otori gave a short laugh.
"Yes, well, we did get off to a bit of a rocky start. Neither of us was born a samurai, but we went about becoming that in different ways."

>They shared a short grin.
"The family you were born to isn't important. It's what you make of yourself that matters."

>Otori and Hijikata were two very different people, but listening to his passion as he talked, there was no doubt that he was similarly admired by his men.
His words resonated with me especiallyâ€¦ I was born into a family of demons, but here I was.

>"We chose to fight for what we believed in. That path lead us here. That's all there is to it."
Hijikata smiled and nodded.

>"Our ambition will never waver. We'll fight till the end, and give it all we've got."
Otori smiled back, relieved.

>"Thanks for your time."
He bowed to both of us, stood up, and let himself out.

>"There's going to be a battle?"
I set about clearing the teacups.

>"C'mere, Chizuru."
He turned and stepped out of the room without even waiting for my response.

>"Huh? Umâ€¦"
I set the teacups down again, and trotted after him.

>Outside the wind was frigid. Without thick clothing, it cut straight through to the bone.
We looked out over Ezo, blanketed in snow.

>"See those mountains.
"â€¦Yeahâ€¦"

>Some miles distant, a row of snow-covered peaks thrust their way up into the slate-gray sky like jagged teeth.
"They'll attack Hakodate through those mountains."

>"Why not from the ocean?"
They'd have to come by ship-there was no other way to Ezo. They meant they'd have to land somewhere to unload troops, so I'd assumed they'd try and take the port first.

>Hijikata seemed to think otherwise.
"No, they're smarter than that. We've got the advantage if they just try to take the port. If the Imperial Army comes to Ezo, they'll probably land in Otobe. Maybe Esashi."

>I nodded.
From what I remembered of the maps of Ezo I'd seen, Otobe and Esashi lay on the opposite side of the mountains.

>"Once their men are over the mountains, they'll have their navy open fire on Hakodate. Attack us on two fronts."<p>

We were at a disadvantage then.

>"Isn't there anything we can do?"
"Not if they attack from the ocean. If it turns into a naval battle, we're screwed. The battle here at Goryokaku will be my last. This is the last place I'll ever draw my sword as a samurai."

>"Hijikataâ€¦"
Did that mean he believed he would die?

>I was desperate to talk about something else, anything else, and so I said the first thing that came into my head.
"If they don't comeâ€¦then what will you do?"

>There was no doubt that they would come, but I couldn't help but dream that maybe, just maybe, they wouldn't.
Hijikata didn't even seem to consider how ridiculous of a question it was. He only shrugged and replied matter-of-factly.

>"If they don't come for us, this whole thing ends. Won't be any need for something like the Shinsengumi anymore."
A new era, where

samurai weren't needed? Where men were no longer compelled to draw swords against one another?

>Could such a future ever come to pass?
I felt my heart swell with a desperate hope that it might.

No sooner had we stepped back into the inviting warmth of Hijikata's office than his expression suddenly shifted.

>His body changed as I watched, his fury nature forcing itself to the fore.
"Hijikata!"

>"Don't worry. I've been doing pretty good since I came to Ezoâ€|"
He forced out a smile even though he was clearly in pain.

>"Looks like my body's getting worse. Hope it'll hold up till spring at least."
Did he mean that he was ready to throw away his life so long as he lived to fight in one last battle?

>When I spoke, I was surprised to find myself shouting.
"Please, don't say that! Didn't I tell you why I'm here"

>I unbuttoned my collar, exposing the pale flesh of my neck, and stepped toward him.
"Please, don't say you just want to live until spring. I need you to live longer than that. Much longer."

>Tears fought to get out, but I swallowed and pushed them back.
"I'm not going to let you go!"

>"â€|You're a scary girl, you know that."
He smiled, although the pain twisted it into a heart-wrenching grimace.

>His hands clasped my shoulders, and I felt his lips brush my neck.
"â€|Haven't tasted any blood in a while."

>I blinked.
"You haven't had an since you left me back in Sendai?"

>He fell silent, and I guessed I was probably right.
"Whyâ€|?"

>I almost asked "why not," but decided it was probably best that I didn't.
He likely wouldn't have answered, and I suspected I already knew the reason.

>If he only cared that his body lasted until spring, then he likely hadn't been taking care of it.
That stubbornness was a double-edged sword to be sure, but it was part of what made him him, and I wouldn't have changed it for the world.

>"My blood must taste awfully good."
I felt him stop suddenly for a moment, surprised, but his lips stayed pressed against my neck.

>"Because I'm a demon. In fact, it must be so good that you don't want to drink anyone else's blood."
He let out a soft snort of surprise.

>"â€|Well, maybe you're right."
When his lips touched my neck again, they felt very, very gentle.

>Before long, winter gave way to spring.
The snow melted, but the weather remained cold.

>We received the disquieting news that the Imperial Army's navy was headed for Ebisu.
The report claimed they meant to lay anchor in Miyako Bay.

>Since the Republic of Ezo didn't have many warships, a plan was hatched to capture the enemy flagship. They could damage enemy morale and bolster their own fleet in one fell swoop.
Hijikata was selected to participate in the operation, but I was ordered to remain at Goryokaku.

>While he was away, I divided my time between being terrified that he might never return and praying for his safety.
To my great relief, he did return from the Ironclad Seizure Operation at Miyako Bay.

>I was so glad to see him that I burst into tears. He gave me a wry smile and a few sarcastic words, but he stayed with me until I

stopped crying.
Unfortunately, the Ironclad Seizure Operation had been a failure.

>One of our ships had been lost, and with it a talented captain. A number of soldiers had died as well, including several men from the Shinsengumi. The flagship had eluded capture, and the attack had ended in a rout.<p>

I sat stunned, and listened to him recount the ordeal. When he finished, he looked me straight in the eye and spoke.

>"You've still got time, Chizuru. Get as far away from Hakodate as you can."
His tone was dead serious.

>"You can take a Russian or British ship. I'll get everything worked out. You won't have to worry about a thing."
His eyes were pleading. I understood what he was trying to do.

>Hijikata knew the Shinsengumi would almost certainly lose the battle that would soon be upon them.
He wanted me to escape to safety, somewhere where Hakodate would be a distant memory. He wanted me to survive.

>â€|But he intended to die.
"â€|I want to stay. With you."

>It warmed my heart to know that he cared for me, but I couldn't leave him alone to die. I wouldn't.
"Please, don't send me away. I want to be with you."

>When he'd been gone on assignment at Miyako Bay, I'd felt empty, as if some integral part of me was missing. Even breathing had felt painful.
A life without him would break my heart in two.

>"â€|I won't ever leave you again."
He knit his eyebrows in worry and looked at me silently for several long moments, then finally let out a sigh.

>"Fine. If it means that much to you, you can stay. â€|You really are a weird one."
He grumbled about it as usual, but at least he'd capitulated.

>I could see his mind working hard as his eyes flicked back and forth in miniscule amounts.
"You're worried about me, right?"

>"â€|Of course."
He looked away and answered with too much forced nonchalance.

>"Well, if you're worried about me, then don't let me out of your sight, okay? It'll be your job to keep me safe."
I smiled at him, and his eyebrows rose in surprise.

>"And you can't do that if you're dead, can you?"
He thought about that for several moments.

>"True, I can't let you out of my sightâ€|"
He wasn't quite willing to commit to the rest, it seemed, but I was happy that he would admit to wanting to live, if only a little.

It was May when the imperial Army began to march toward Ezo.

>Just as Hijikata had predicted, they landed in Otobe and moved their forces through the Matsumae and Futamata Passes.
Otori led the men who had been assigned to hold the Matsumae Pass, and Hijikata the men assigned to Futamata.

>I had accompanied Hijikata to the Futamata Pass, where we waited for the enemy to show themselves.
Even though the snow had long since melted, the weather was still quite cold, and it grew even worse during the night.

>Some night, it was enough to make men stationed out of doors lose sensation in their hands and feet.
On one such night, Hijikata appeared at the makeshift barracks with a barrel of alcohol.

>"Battle's gonna start soon. I'll be counting on you guys."
"O-Of course, sir! Thank you, sir!"

>Hijikata went down the lines, pouring a cup for each soldier.
"We

can't afford to rest unfortunately, but I figured at least you could have a little sake."

>It wasn't every day that a general went down among his men to pass out alcohol, and it was easy to see that the gesture had moved and inspired them.
"I'd like to just give you as much as you want, but we don't know when the fighting's gonna start. And we sure as hell don't wanna be drunk when they attack, right?"

>A ripple of laughter moved through the men.
"So, sorry I gotta be a killjoy, but for now you only get on cup. Once this fight's over, you can have as much as you want."

>"Yeah! We'll make it through this! â€|No, screw that! We're gonna kick ass, so we can come back here and get drunk! That's something worth fighting for!"
The soldiers laughed and cheered, and Hijikata even joined in.

>The whole army was tense with the anticipation of battle. Every person at the Futamata Pass knew that it would be a difficult one.
But Hijikata's visit had raised their spirits and bolstered their resolve. The frigid spring night seemed a little bit warmer.

>A Hijikata and I walked back to his tent from the barracks, the soldiers still talking and carousing behind us, I finally spoke.
"Hijikata, are you all right?"

>He looked down at me, one eyebrow raised.
"Umâ€|"

>I was at a loss for words. Something had made me nervous, but I couldn't put my finger on whatâ€|
"You'reâ€|you're not drunk, are you?"

>He grinned and gave a snort of laughter.
"What, that's it? C'mon kid, I only had one cut. I can hold my liquor."

>The smile faded from his face and his gaze slipped into the distance.
"They're likeâ€|sons to me, you know."

>I knew how he felt.
The men in that barracks had gathered to the battle standard of the Shinsengumi. Their warrior souls longed for the honor and righteousness the Shinsengumi stood for.

>"Not much I can do for them now. Seems like a little sake's the least I can give them."
There was no option of retreat from the Futamata Pass. If the enemy overwhelmed us, or our ammunition ran out, then the Imperial Army would slaughter us and march to Ezo.

>But even in the face of such odds, no one doubted Hijikata. Each and every man there was prepared to fight, and to die, if that was what he called upon them to do.
Sake was a small thing to give them in return, but perhaps it was enough.

>"â€|I'm sure they understand how you feel."
He blinked, his eyes coming back into focus, and turned to look at me. His face broke into a warm smile.

>"Well, if you think so, then I must've done something right."<p>

I felt my face flush.

>Well, I thought to myself, I need to tell him how I feel more often.<p>

By early the June, the weather had begun to warm up.

>Unfortunately, with the warm weather came battle at the Matsumae Pass, and Otori's men were routed by the Imperial Army.
Hijikata and his men were ordered to retreat from Futamata and return to Goryokaku in Hakodate, where the final battle would take place.

>Everything had gone just as Hijikata had predicted.<p>

After returning to Hakodate, Hijikata immediately left for Benten Fortress.

>Benten had been built on a section of man-made land that extended out into the ocean. It was outfitted with an artillery battery to fend off attacks by hostile navies.
Hijikata's purpose there was to meet with Otori and other members of the Shinsengumi.

>"It's been a while, Hijikata, sir!"
Clearly far too long for Shimada, who looked delighted to see his old friend.

>When he noticed me, he grinned even wider.
"I'm glad you're doing well too. I hear you're Hijikata's page now."

>"Yes, he's decided to let me stick around."
I grinned back.

>"I don't know if I can live up to the bar you set, but I'm doing my best!"
Shimada shook his head and laughed.

>"No, nobody can do what you do."
I blinked.

>"Huh?"
Hijikata gave a heavy sigh.

>"Hey, Shimada, knock it off. That stuff starts going to her head, and I'm gonna be the one who has to deal with it."
Shimada shut his mouth with a snap.

>Hijikata gave a short snort, then asked him to go fetch Otori.
"I'm sorry, Hijikata."

>Hijikata turned to Otori who had wasted no time to answer his call.
Otori frowned.

>"It's my fault we lost Matsumae Pass."
He looked exhausted, his face lined and tight.

>Hijikata only sighed before saying, "What happened happened. We got screwed because we split up our forces. The imperial Army has us outnumbered. If we want to win this, we're gonna have to concentrate our men at Benten and Goryokaku, right?"
Otori relaxed visibly.

>Shimada placed his fist over his chest.
"You can trust us with Benten Fortress!"

>His tone was cheerful, but almost desperately so.
"So long as the Shinsengumi standard flies, we'll fight to the last man!"

>Hijikata gave him a wry smile.
"â€|Don't say crap like that. You already forget Otori's in command of the fortress?"

>Shimada wilted slightly.
Otori gave a soft chuckle and turned to Shimada.

>"I'll raise the Shinsengumi's standard for this battle. Then everything should be fine, right?"
He smiled at us.

>"So long as it's up, I don't think I could lose. I've lost some battles here and there, sure, but I've never given up on the spirit of the samurai."
He smiled at Hijikata, who responded by curling up the corner of his mouth.

>"What, now the Minister of the Army's superstitious? You need to get your act together, Otori."
That was when I realized, suddenly, that all three of them were smiling.

>They weren't just fellow soldiers anymore: they were comrades and friends, united in purpose.
"All right, I'm gonna leave Benten in your hands."

>After acknowledging nods all around, he turned to leave.
"â€|Good luck."

>I bowed and turned to Hijikata.
Shimada placed a hand on my shoulder.

>"Yukimura! â€|I'm trusting you with Hijikata."
I turned to see him looking at me, his eyes serious.

>I nodded, without hesitation.
"I'll do my best. I'm ready to lay down my life, just like anyone in the Shinsengumi."

>He gave me a wry smile.
"No, you don't need to risk your life. I want you to protect Hijikata's heart."

>"What?"
Shimada nodded.

>"He's a strong man, but he hides behind that strength, and he suffers alone. He needs someone who can look past that, and be there to support him, I believe that someone is you."
To stay by Hijikata's side and support him was all that I wanted, butâ€|
>"Can I really do that?"
Soon we'd be plunged into a violent and bloody battle. How much help could I be to Hijikata in the middle of a war?
>But Shimada just smiled.
"Of course. I think you're the only one who can. He trusts you more than anyone else."
>"â€|All right."
I would protect Hijikata's heart. No one else could stand by him in the days to come.
>I nodded firmly to Shimada, my mind set.<p>

It was the evening of June 19th.

>We were going about our normal business when Hijikata suddenly spoke.
"If they're going to attack, it'll be tomorrow."

>"â€|Right."
The Imperial Army was nearly on our doorstep. When the sun rose the next day, Hakodate would become a battlefield, and Goryokaku would be our last refuge.
>"Chizuruâ€| Are you sure-"
I knew what he was about to say.

>"Yes. I am. I'll stay with you."
However the battle ended, I meant to be there with him when it did.
>He sighed.
"I need to stop letting you say it all the timeâ€|"

>I blinked.
"Whatâ€|?"

>His expression was solemn, but his lips were pressed tightly together, and I could feel his hesitation.
"Umâ€|"

>The silence dragged on and on, until I began to feel rather uncomfortable.
Finally, I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could-

>"More than anything else, I want to keep you safe. I'mâ€| I think I'm probably in love with you."
My mouth hung open, the question I'd intended to ask now long forgotten.

>I'd loved Hijikata for some time by then, and in the past weeks and months I'd begun to realize how much he cared for me as well.
Butâ€|to hear the words at lastâ€|

>For a moment, I thought my heart would stop.
"In love"â€|

>He gently lifted my mouth shut, and gave me a crooked smile.
"I thought I could just die as soon as I'd done what I had to do for the Shinsengumi."

>I didn't know what to say.
"It's not that I wanted to die, or anything like that. I justâ€|wouldn't have had anything to live for anymore."

>He smiled, although it seemed a little sad.
At most, he had only ever allowed me glimpses of his thoughts and feelings, but nowâ€| Now he was telling me things I was sure no other human had ever heard.

>It made me happy to know that he trusted me so truly and deeply, but what he was telling me was heartbreaking. To look into the future and seeâ€|nothing?
How could that not have been agony?

>"So long as I led the Shinsengumi and made them into what they were meant to be, what did it matter if I lived or died?"
The Shinsengumi had been the only thing that kept him going. Once that burden was no longer his to carry, his life would be empty.

>Unless he could find something new, what reason would there be to go on living?
"â€|But now I've got a reason to live."

>I felt my body sag with relief.
"I'm so gladâ€|"

>He'd been through so much pain, and yet he still wanted to live.

That made me happier than anything else.
"That's€|that's great€|"
>I could feel tears start to well up my eyes.
Hijikata smiled down at me tenderly and laid his hand against my cheek.
>When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.
"You're the reason I want to live."
>"Me€|?"
Did€|did he really mean that?
>Could I really be Hijikata's reason for living?
Would I be able to give him what the Shinsengumi had?
>"I€|I€|"
>I started to cry.
>He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it.
There was no more need for words.
>He wrapped his arms around my body and drew me close. I felt his warm breath moments before his lips pressed against mine.
There, nestled safe in his encircling arms, I felt content. I felt happy.

>His hair brushed against my tear-stained cheeks, tickling me.
I could feel his desire for me, in a way so deep and powerful that mere words could never have done it justice.
>His warmth pressed against me, soothing even the deepest places in my heart. All the wounds I'd suffered at sorrow's hand began to close; his love the only salve they needed.
At last, his stubborn heart had opened, and through his lips it poured out what it had long kept hidden. His touch was as gentle as ripples on a lake, but when we kissed I felt in him a passion that burned so hot as to put a forge to shame.
>I could feel our hearts, our feelings, our very selves intertwine€|
And though that feeling faded as our lips parted, the love that had flowed between us remained in my heart, its radiance undimmed.
>I love Hijikata and he loves me.
That was an immutable truth now: The sky was blue, fire was hot, and we loved one another.
>A faint smile played about Hijikata's face as we looked at each other, but when he spoke it was with the strong, powerful voice I'd heard many times before, when he commanded his men.
"You're going to stay by my side. I won't let you go even if you want to, so be prepared."
>His eyes met mine, and through them I felt an echo of the moment we'd just shared.
"Yes!"
>I couldn't stop crying. My heart overflowed with joy, and it trickled down my face as tears.
I helped give Hijikata a reason to live. Or at least, that was how he felt.
>That was more than I ever could have asked for.<p>

The following day, Hijikata received notice that Benten Fortress had come under concentrated bombardment.
>The Imperial Army had begun their attack.
After hearing how dire the situation at Benten was, Hijikata immediately decided to send reinforcements to the fortress.
>"I'm leaving to support the men at Benten. €|Chizuru. You're coming, right?"
"Yes!"
>He grinned.<p>

Since I'd never learned to ride a horse, Hijikata had simply set me behind him on his, and set off for Benten Fortress.
>We galloped through the town, moving at what seemed to me an incredible pace, when suddenly-
The crack of a gunshot rang out, and something slammed into Hijikata's body.
>"Ahhh!"
The horse, surprised by the gunshot, reared up and threw us to the ground.

>"Ow!"
Now rid of its frightening burden, the horse bolted.
>I'd been fortunate enough to land in a bush, and so the greatest injury I'd sustained was a number of small scratches.
"Hijikata!"

>I crawled across the ground toward his body, my own bruised and aching.<p>

The soil all around him was stained dark red.

>In my time with the Shinsengumi, I had seen many battlefields, and a great deal of blood, but thisâ€|
Terror gripped my heart, and I could hear blood hammering in my ears.

>What was I going to do?
"Hijikata!"

>I shook his body, and almost cried out when he stirred.
His wound was serious. a normal human would have died instantly, but his fury blood had kept him alive-if only barely.

>"Please, say something!"
His eyes opened to this slits.

>"Chizuruâ€| Are you all right?"
"Yes! I'm fine!"

>He was nearly dead, and undoubtedly in excruciating pain, but even then his first thought had been my safety.
I choked back a sob. This was not the time.

>"â€|We're in trouble if they come back to finish the job. We need to get out of here and wait for this to heal."
He struggled to his feet and began to walk, blood dripping down the length of his body.

>"Hijikata, stop!"
I ran over and hauled his arm around my shoulder. He leaned against it gratefully.

>After seeing us shot and thrown from the horse, the shooter undoubtedly assumed we were dead. They weren't likely to come back, but if we didn't move, we could still be found.
"â€|You're right. We need to leave, but please, let me help you walk. You're hurt."

>I gave him the bravest smile I could muster and shifted his arm to a better position across my shoulders.
He smiled back.

>At first, we headed for Goryokaku, but the Imperial Army had already laid siege to it.
We could have been walking to our deaths.

>For the time being, we needed to hide ourselves, and for that we needed a place away from the enemy lines.
To the rear of Goryokaku, we found it.

>A garden of cherry trees, the soft petals of their blossoms dancing in the wind.
It felt almost unreal, as if we were stepping into another worldâ€|

>We rested at last beneath one of the trees, where the smell of flowers could help drive away the scent of blood.<p>

Hijikata's wounds were deep, and so far had shown no signs of healing.

>Perhaps his fury power was beginning to fade. Perhaps that meant that his life would soon be at an endâ€|
Suddenly my mind was full of dreadful things and I froze, paralyzed with dread.

>"You look good next to those cherry blossoms."
"â€|Huh?"

>I blinked.
"Doâ€|do you really think so?"

>I'd never thought that myself, of anything remotely like it.
"I've always thought they really suited you, though."

>Hijikata would look right at home in the middle of a storm of blossoms.
Each fallen petal was strikingly beautiful, in defiance of the tragic end they would surely face.

>There was a strange sort of heroism to the cherry blossom, I thought; to shine so brightly in defiance of fate.
Hijikata, with

his unshakable devotion to the samurai way, shone as brilliantly and beautifully as any cherry blossom.

>"Ohâ€¦"
>For some reason I found that thought calmed me.

>The worries that had crowded my mind began to fade, and I felt myself beginning to think that perhaps things would work out after all.
>The sight of the blossoms, and the sound of Hijikata's calm gentle voice raised my spirits back up. We would survive!

>Hijikata and I would make it through this war, side by side. This was not the time to lose hope.
>When I turned to look at him, I saw that there was a tender smile on his face, almost as if he could see my thoughts.

>"Hijikataâ€¦"
>When spring came next year, I wanted to be here with him to watch the cherry blossoms fall. I wanted to be with him when every spring came.

>The words were waiting, ready on my tongue, when a great gust sprang up, throwing the wildly tumbling petals high into the air.
>They drifted slowly, almost lazily, back to the ground, and then suddenlyâ€¦

>He was there.
>"So, you were aliveâ€¦"

>Kazama's eyes fell on Hijikata, and his mouth curled up in a smile.
>"Whyâ€¦?"

>My voice broke, but Kazama only laughed.
>"I'm here to put an end to all of this. This man is an affront to my honor, and must be destroyed.

>That day at the Utsunomiya Castle, Kazama had warned us that he would return, but I'd never thought he would forsake his clan and travel all the way to Ezo just to fight Hijikata.
>"I'm surprised to see you made it here, to the north. Impressive, for a fake."

That was a little surprisingâ€¦

>His tone was as derisive as usual, but his words were almostâ€¦compliments. Backhanded, to be sure, but praise of a sort nonetheless.
>In some way, he recognized what Hijikata had been through..

>"â€¦Didn't think you'd come all the way to Ezo. If I'd bought it already, you would've wasted your time."
>Hijikata's face twisted into a crooked grin.

>"No! You can't! Hijikata is hurt!"
>If he fought in his condition, he'd surely die. I stepped in front of Hijikata, between him and Kazama, but he reached out an arm to stop me.

>"Chizuru, stay out of this."
>"But-!"

>A gentle glance from Hijikata silenced me before I could finish.
>"If he's ready to give up everything he's got to fight me, how can I call myself a samurai if I turn tail?"

>"That'sâ€¦"
>Kazama had left behind his clan and his life just for the sake of defending his honor.

>Hijikata and Kazama were different men in almost every way, but perhaps they shared a warriors pride.
>"I'm fighting for what I believe in. And I'll win, no matter what, because I'm going to live."

I saw the determination in his eyes, and knew that there was no point to arguing with him. I'd seen that look plenty of times before, and it meant his mind was made up.

>Even if I could convince him to run, then everything he'd stood for and lived for would be destroyed.
>No. I couldn't do that.

>"Fine. I'll just watch."
>"â€¦Sorry, Chizuru."

>I shook my head.
>"Don't apologize. I believe in you."

>Kazama let out a snort of laughter.
"You want to live, huh? Furies are only imitations. The more you use those powers of yours, the shorter your life gets. How can a human beast that thirsts only for blood possibly compare to a full-blooded demon?"
>He caught a falling petal and stroked idly at it with one finger.
"You are destined to simply wither and die. How could this end any other way? You throw your life away so easily, just like these cherry blossoms."

My heart skipped a beat.

>Beautiful as the blossoms were, death and decay claimed them all too quickly.
Would death soon be here to claim Hijikata as well?

>"I'm not throwing my life away."
Hijikata's voice was calm.

>"there were just a lot of things I had to protect. The life of a samurai's not an easy one."
There was the hint of a smile playing about his lips.

>Kazama looked carefully at Hijikata for several moments before he finally spoke.
"Perhaps the name of 'fury' no long suits you. The life you strive to live is not that of a fake."

>There was no hint of contempt left in his words.
"You are a demon. I rescind any times I called you false."

>There was the slightest smile on Kazama's face, but this was no sneer of contempt: It was a smile of satisfaction, of excitement.
Perhaps Kazama, just like the rest of us, at last understood just what sort of man Hijikata was.

>My respect for Hijikata drove me to help him in whatever way I could, but Kazama's would manifest in a different way-the exchange of swords.
"If you are now a demon, then you must have a demon's name. I name youâ€|"

>A sudden gust of wind swirled around us.
"â€|Hakuoki."

>It seemed almost as if the name had been chosen long, long ago, so perfectly did it fit him.
Perhaps, I thought, this was destiny.

>"Thanks I guess, but I'm not doing this so you'll call me a demon, you know."
His mouth quirked up in a smile as he slid his sword from it's sheath. With a sigh, his body shivered and suddenly this hair was white.

>"Can't play long, though. That a problem?"
"Not at all. I'll kill you with the first blow."

>Kazama nodded, his own sword sliding from it's scabbard.<p>

I could not interfere, but I didn't need to. I believed Hijikata would win.

>The battle would be decided in the single moment of their first attack. the skill of each was so great that even the smallest mistake would mean death.
Would luck decide their match? Ability? Emotion?

>They stood apart from one another, still as statues.
A strong gust of wind blew up, casting scores of petals into the air between the two combatants.

>In that instant, they both leapt forward.
For a brief moment, their swords met.

>There was no give and take to this encounter; no block and parry. Everything that each man had went into that first, deciding blow.
Kazama's sword passed within a hairbreadth of Hijikataâ€|

>But Hijikata's blade found its mark, burying itself deep in the demon's heart.
"There's still something I've got to protect. I

can't lose, not even to a demon."

>Hijikata's voice was quiet and strong.
Even in the very act of taking another man's life, his eyes were strangely gentle.

>"If I can die on the blade of a samurai such as youâ€|"
Even with his heart skewered by Hijikata's blade, Kazama could still talk. He put on a brave smile as he spoke.

>"â€|Then I have no regrets. I have lived my life with honor, and I die with the same."
His eyes were clear and free of hostility. If anything, he seemed at peace.

>To die in a duel against a foe he respected was a death he could accept with grace.
"Hakuoki. Now you must live out what life you have left."

>They were his last words.
Hijikata drew his sword out of Kazama's body as it fell, and dropped the still bloody sword back into its scabbard.

>As the blade slid home, Hijikata's body returned to its human form.
"Yeahâ€| I will."

>Then his body wavered, and he fell to his knees.
"Hijikata!"

>I ran to his side.
He had never compromised his principles, and now his rival was finally defeated.

>But he had pushed his body to its limit. His strength was gone. Hijikata's long battle was finally coming to a close.<p>

Tears began to well up in my eyes. I looked up toward the sky to keep them from spilling out, and watched as the blossoms of the cherry trees danced across the heavens.

* * *

><p>(Yay! Now quickly to the final chapter!)

20. Final Chapter

FINAL CHAPTER !

Hijikata didn't reach Benten Fortress.

>Even with the reinforcements Hijikata had sent, the fortress couldn't hold against the Imperial Army and surrendered.
Eventually they took Hakodate as well, and the army of the Republic of Ezo was forced to surrender.

>Just as spring came to Ezo, the war the Shinsengumi had fought for so long came to an end.
I heard later that it had been Otori who convinced the army to surrender peacefully.

>Better to live and see the future than die and be denied it. â€|Just the sort of thing I expected from Otori.
The Imperial Army had recognized Enomoto's skill, and spared his life, sending him to prison instead of the executioner.

>Somehow, Shimada had survived the final, fierce battle, and escaped unscathed.
When I'd asked what he intended to do, he'd laughed, and said he'd probably open a school of swordsmanship in Kyoto.

Every time I see cherry blossoms bloom, I remember what had happened at Ezo.

>How many lives were lost, and how many patriots had fought and died for what they'd believed in.
But perhaps most of all, I remember the time I spent with Hijikata.

>"They're so beautifulâ€|"
Pirouetting and dancing on each breeze of wind, the cherry petals brushed against my skin like silk, each

one bringing a tiny wiff of the smell of new life.
>Whenever I see the colors of spring, I remember that wonderful time.
â€|The time he spent by my side.
>"You really like cherry blossoms that much, huh?"
He looked at me, his mouth twisted into a small grin.
>"Yeah."
I probably looked rather silly but I didn't feel embarrassed by it anymore.
>"I like them because they remind me of you."
He looked at me in serene contemplation for a moment, then let his grin spread across his face into a smile.
>"Well, I like 'em too. They remind me of you."<p>

His voice, soft and quiet, threw my mind into chaos.
>I could feel my face flush. When he spoke to me like that, there was no hiding my feelings.
I doubt I'll every grow used to his voice. The very sound of it sets my heart to beating.
>"I've been worried about the end coming, latelyâ€|"
Suddenly, his tone is serious.
>"I never get bored when I'm with you. Sometimes, I wish I could live forever."
"Ohâ€|"
It was a wish that I secretly shared.
As a fury, Hijikata had spent his future in exchange for power in the present. How much he had spent, we couldn't know. His life could end tomorrow.
>If he could live forever, then that fear of the unknown would disappear.
â€|But I knew that could never be.
>"It'd probably be an easy way to goâ€| Just accept that I'm used up, and wither awayâ€|"
His voice was still calm and gentle, but his gaze had drifted somewhere far away.
>"â€|But I don't want that. I'll fight to stay alive as long as I can."
As he finished, his eyes turned to me and his mouth curled up into a warm smile.
>"I don't want us to be apartâ€|"
I would stay and fight with him, until the end was last upon us, so that I could look death in the eye and say we'd made the most of what we'd had.
>"I want to stay with you as long as I can."
His smile twitched with a momentary smirk.
>"â€|You cry so easily, I'd feel pretty bad if I left you behind."
"Ohâ€|"
He was right. Without my even noticing, tears had begun to roll down my cheeks. I blinked in surprise, but that hardly helped.
Just when I thought I'd learned to put on a brave face for himâ€|

>"Sorry, Hijikata. I didn't mean to make you worryâ€|"
He grinned.

>"You're mine, right?"
"Hijikataâ€|"
His words were short and to the point, but his voice was full of tenderness.
"If you're mine," he continued, "Then that means I'm responsible for you. I'm here to look out for you. I worry about you 'cause I want to, so don't be blaming yourself. And that's why it's also my duty to wipe your tears. You'll never have to cry alone."

>"Thenâ€|"
I looked up at him and smiled.
>"You're mine too, right?"
All mine, every wonderful part of him.

>"Then I'm responsible for you too. If you cry, I'll wipe your tears."
He laughed.
>"There's no beating you, is there?"
Surrounded by cherry blossoms, we sat as springtime returned to the north.
>Next year, and the year after that, I wanted to watch spring unfold with him. I wanted more happy memories like this one. And I wanted

the day that we would be separated to never comeâ€|<p>

FIN

* * *

><p>(And there you have it! Now be sure to buy Hakuoki for the PSP, 3DS, or in the near future in May for the PS3 so that you can see the other stories and also so you can experience every intense moment of Hijikata the proper way! I'll be buying that one(PS3 Hakuoki) next! Can't wait! Bye now!)
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End
file.